BLACKWATER

THE COMPLETE CASKEY FAMILY SAGA BY

Michael McDowell

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN LANGAN

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BLACKWATER:

The Complete Caskey Family Saga

by

Michael McDowell

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The Whirlpool:
With Howard and Eudora
on the Banks of the Perdido

by John Langan

John Langan is the author of two collections of stories, *The Wide, Carnivorous Sky and Other Monstrous Geographies* (Hippocampus 2013) and *Mr. Gaunt and Other Uneasy Encounters* (Prime 2008), and a novel, *House of Windows* (Night Shade 2009). With Paul Tremblay, he co-edited *Creatures: Thirty Years of Monsters* (Prime 2011). He lives with his family in upstate New York.

Readers new to Blackwater *should note that this introduction reveals elements of the plot.*

In January of 1983, Michael McDowell, a thirty-two year old writer, published a somewhat short novel of supernatural horror titled *The Flood*. Set in the small, southeast Alabama town of Perdido, the narrative begins at dawn, on Easter Sunday morning of 1919, with the town in flood. While reconnoitering Perdido's flooded streets via rowboat, Oscar Caskey, son of an influential local family, discovers a mysterious woman sheltering in a second-story room of the town's hotel. Despite the cautions of Bray Sugarwhite, the family servant who is manning the oars, Oscar rescues Elinor Dammert. The novel spares little time in justifying Bray's concerns. Elinor is not completely human; at times, when submerged in water, she transforms into a kind of monstrous amphibian.* In her human form, however, Elinor is completely charming, and Oscar is soon smitten with her. His mother, Mary-Love, is certain that this was Elinor's goal all along, and she sets herself against the other woman. Elinor reciprocates Oscar's feelings, and in short order—despite Mary-Love's best efforts—the two are wed. The remainder of the novel relates the couple's efforts to establish their own household, removed from Mary-Love's sway, and the dramatic

sacrifice they must make in order to do so. It also shows us the terrible fate suffered by those unlucky enough to encounter the changed Elinor.

A month later, McDowell followed *The Flood* with a second volume, *The Levee*, which picks up the narrative of Elinor and Oscar and the other members of the Caskey family and carries it forward in time, as the inhabitants of Perdido construct a series of levees to prevent a recurrence of the flood from the first book, an enterprise whose success demands a secret, bloody offering. In March, April, and May, McDowell released *The House*, *The War*, and *The Fortune*, respectively, each of which advances the story still further, as the Great Depression yields to the Second World War, and the Caskeys, increasingly under Elinor's guidance, gain in wealth and power. Finally, in June, came *Rain*, which concludes the story of Elinor Dammert's relationship with the Caskey family and the town of Perdido. Collectively, the six-part saga would be known as *Blackwater*. Borrowing a page from the great serial writers of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, McDowell had published what was in fact a substantial horror novel. For anyone familiar with the particulars of McDowell's life, his use of the serial form was perhaps not that surprising: he had earned a Ph.D. from Brandeis in the literature of the nineteenth century.

In its method of publication, *Blackwater* was ambitious. It was no less so in its narrative design. Previously, McDowell had authored a number of well-received horror novels—*Cold Moon Over Babylon* (1980) and *The Elementals* (1981) among the best of them—which had identified him as one of the bright lights in a constellation of writers that included Stephen King, Peter Straub, and Ramsey Campbell. Together, this group of writers was engaged in renovating the horror novel, doing so by bringing together the stuff of traditional horror with techniques drawn from the literary mainstream. Thus, King mixed the tentacular cosmicism of Lovecraft with the blunt naturalism of Norris and Dreiser, while Straub blended the atavistic mysticism of Machen with the mannerism of Henry James, and Campbell combined Lovecraft with the linguistic paranoia of Nabokov. This cross-pollination allowed the horror novel to develop in new directions. The form moved towards a deeper engagement with the world into which its horrific elements intrude. It traced with greater precision the emotional and intellectual responses of its characters to that intrusion. It evoked more of the ways in which the horror's disruption might be made manifest.

In his interview with Douglas Winter for *Faces of Fear* (1985), McDowell described his own writing as the confluence of two writers, specifically of Lovecraft with Eudora Welty's understated Modernism. As is the case with King et al., to mention Lovecraft's gelatinous monstrosities in the same breath as Welty's small-town eccentrics sounds like the start of a joke, possibly a very bad one. Yet it is almost surprisingly easy to identify points of convergence between their respective bodies of work. Both Lovecraft and Welty are writers of place, interested in small, carefully-rendered communities. Within those settings, they are drawn to old families, particularly as they represent the persistence of the past into the present. In their different ways, Lovecraft and Welty address the intersection of the mundane and the numinous: Lovecraft in most of his longer fiction; Welty in her short novel, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), and the linked stories that comprise *The Golden Apples* (1949). McDowell also drew attention to Welty's gift for rendering her characters' speech, especially at length, which is a recurrent feature of *Blackwater*. Given that McDowell was raised in Geneva and Brewton, a pair of towns in southeastern Alabama, it is not a great leap in critical biography to say that Welty's work gave him a means to make use of his experience of the American south in his fiction.

This McDowell does to great effect in *Blackwater*. While Elinor Dammert, later Caskey, is never far from the events of the ongoing narrative, the book is quite happy to wander into the lives of its ever-expanding cast of characters, from Mary-Love Caskey and her brother, James; to Oscar's sister, Elvennia (known throughout, somewhat dismissively, as merely "Sister"); to James's estranged wife, Genevieve, and her sister, Queenie; to the African-American servants who work for the Caskeys, Bray and Ivey Sapp and Ivey's sister, Zaddie; to the children of the Caskeys, Miriam and Frances; to a host of secondary figures. Indeed, at moments, the narrative perspective approaches that of the town, itself. His attention to setting aligns McDowell with contemporaries such as Stephen King and Charles Grant, each of whom also exploited the possibilities of an extensively-imagined small town to lend the supernatural threat to it more heft. (Given that Grant's Oxrun Station novels and stories revisit the community at various moments throughout its history, his use of setting is in some ways closer to McDowell's.) Of course, all three writers are indebted to the examples of Lovecraft and Faulkner, both of whom fictionalized the places familiar to them, then joined the narratives they set

in them through a variety of means ranging from recurring characters to shared themes; Lovecraft and Faulkner, in turn, derive from Balzac, who arranged his fictional oeuvre into a vast, inter-related network whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts—which is the ultimate aim of and justification for any such enterprise. It is to McDowell's credit that, with *Blackwater*, he succeeds in creating such a structure.**

McDowell also employs literary techniques that would be at home in the fiction of Balzac, Faulkner, or Welty. Elinor Dammert's name, for example, is weighted with significance. Elinor, a variant of Eleanor, means foreign, alien, while Dammert is the third person present-tense form of the German verb "dämmern," whose meanings encompass the coming of dawn or dusk, as well as the figurative dawning of an individual's understanding. Elinor Dammert is thus the dawning of the other, the alien. Her name coincides with her discovery by Oscar Caskey at dawn on the day commemorating the rising of the resurrected Christ. At the same time, she is found amidst a watery landscape that recalls the dawn of creation at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, when all is water.

Water is one of the novel's two major symbols; indeed, so important is the substance to the novel's design that, McDowell tells us in his "Author's Note," he altered the courses of the Perdido and Blackwater Rivers to bring them together above the town. A look at the map that follows that note in the original Avon paperbacks reveals the reason for such a shift. With the "Grove of Live Oaks" positioned at their junction, the intersection of the rivers suggests the mons veneris, the female body written onto the very landscape. It is another way the novel associates water with the feminine, with Elinor. At the place where the rivers come together, there is a whirlpool, dangerous to even the most experienced boaters and swimmers. The swirling together of the red Perdido and the dark Blackwater presents an image of the cyclical, which finds embodiment in the plot, where events repeat themselves in the lives of successive characters, and where the very end of the novel wheels around to its beginning. The blending of the rivers also suggests the merging of Elinor with the Caskey family, as well as more abstract combinations, such as the joining of the female and the male, the supernatural and the natural, the Freudian eros and thanatos.

The other major symbol in the novel is that of the house, particularly a house within which a character senses something wrong. In his interview with Douglas Winter, McDowell discussed his childhood sense of his

grandmother's house as somehow a bad place, an impression he later found was shared by the rest of his family. He decided to incorporate his memory into *Blackwater*, where it becomes a leitmotif linking the experiences of a number of different characters. Time and again, a character is alone in a room and aware of a disturbance in the surrounding house, a series of sounds or lights or smells of inexplicable origin. Since the definition of house encompasses family, the disturbed house becomes a symbol for the intrusion of the supernatural into the Caskey line.

After *Blackwater*, Michael McDowell would not release another novel of supernatural horror until *Toplin* appeared via small press in 1985. He had lost his editor at Avon books, which had published *Blackwater*, and that change coincided with McDowell writing an increasing number of scripts for television and film—most famously, an early draft of what would become Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988). Considering the accomplishment of *Blackwater*, not to mention his other books, it is hard not to wish he had written more novels before his untimely death in 1999. The body of work he left behind, however, remains and endures. Now that her story is once again available to a wider audience, Elinor Caskey, née Dammert, steps out of the red waters of the Perdido River, her eyes keen. Waiting for her on the shore, Howard Lovecraft and Eudora Welty take her hands and guide her towards the waiting reader.

Notes:

* Exactly what Elinor becomes is never made clear. The strength and savagery she displays when transformed suggest an alligator, but while she possesses a tail in her changed form, the other details of her appearance do not suggest the crocodilian. If anything, she calls to mind the Gill-Man from the 1954 film, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

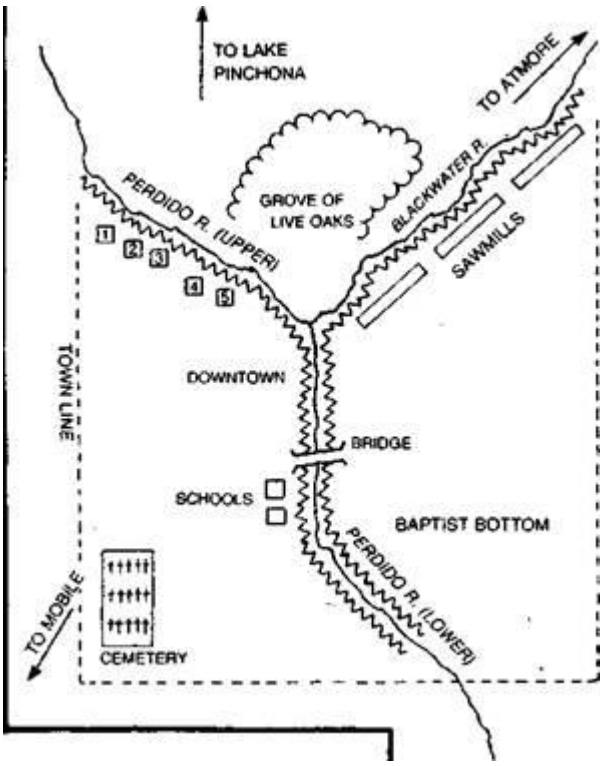
Editor's note: Physical transformation aside, McDowell begins the series with an epigraph referencing a maenad, perhaps suggesting a thematic link between Elinor and the "raving women" of Greek mythology, followers of Dionysus known for tearing animals and people to pieces…and sometimes eating them.

** In fact, near the end of *The War*, McDowell speaks of two of his characters watching the "cold moon over Babylon," thus inserting a

reference to one of his other novels as well.

BLACKWATER:

The Complete Caskey Family Saga



Perdido, Alabama
pop. 1,200 SITE OF LEVEE WA

1. OSCAR & ELINOR CASKEY'S HOME
2. MARY-LOVE CASKEY'S HOME
3. JAMES CASKEY'S HOME
4. DeBORDENAVES HOME
5. TURK'S HOME

TO GULF OF MEXICO

Author's Note

Perdido, Alabama, does indeed exist, and in the place I have put it. Yet it does not now, nor ever did possess the buildings, geography, or population I ascribe to it. The Perdido and Blackwater rivers, moreover, have no junction at all. Yet the landscapes and persons I describe, I venture to say, are not wholly imaginary.

For Mama El

The maenad loves—and furiously defends herself against love's importunity. She loves—and kills. From the depths of sex, from the dark, primeval past of the battles of the sexes arise this splitting and bifurcating of the female soul, wherein woman first finds the wholeness and primal integrity of her feminine consciousness. So tragedy is born of the female essence's assertion of itself as a dyad.

Vyacheslav Ivanov, "The Essence of Tragedy"
Translated by Laurence Senelick

I will spunge out the sweetness of my heart,
And suck up horror; Love, woman's thoughts, I'll kill,
And leave their bodies rotting in my mind,
Hoping their worms will sting; not man outside,
Yet will I out of hate engender much:
I'll be the father of a world of ghosts
And get the grave with carcase.

Thomas Lovell Beddoes, "Love's Arrow Poisoned"

Prologue

At dawn on Easter Sunday morning, 1919, the cloudless sky over Perdido, Alabama, was a pale translucent pink not reflected in the black waters that for the past week had entirely flooded the town. The sun, immense and reddish-orange, had risen just above the pine forest on the far side of what had been Baptist Bottom. This was the low-lying area of Perdido where all the emancipated blacks had huddled in 1865, and where their children and grandchildren huddled still. Now it was only a murky swirl of planks and tree limbs and bloated dead animals. Of downtown Perdido no more was to be seen than the town hall, with its four-faced tower clock, and the second floor of the Osceola Hotel. Only memory might tell where the courses of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers had lain scarcely a week before. All twelve hundred inhabitants of Perdido had fled to higher ground. The town rotted beneath a wide sheet of stinking, still black water, which only now was beginning to recede. The pediments and gables and chimneys of houses that had not been broken up and washed away jutted up through the black shining surface of the flood, stone and brick and wooden emblems of distress. But no assistance came to their silent summonses, and driftwood and unidentifiable detritus and scraps of clothing and household furnishings swept against them and were caught and formed reeking nests around those upraised fingers.

Black water lapped lazily against the brick walls of the town hall and the Osceola Hotel. The water was otherwise silent and unmoving. People who have never lived through a flood may imagine that fish swim in and out of the broken windows of submerged houses, but they don't. In the first place, the windows don't break, for no matter how well constructed a house may have been, the water rises through the floorboards, and the windowless pantry is flooded to the same depth as the front porch. And beyond that, the fish keep to the old riverbeds, just as if they hadn't twenty or thirty feet more of new freedom above that. Floodwater is foul, and filled with foul things, and catfish and bream, though they don't like the unaccustomed darkness, swim in confused circles around their old rocks and their old weeds and their familiar bridge pilings.

Someone standing in the little square room directly beneath the town hall clocks, and peering out the narrow vertical window that looked west,

might have seen approaching across that flat black unreflecting surface of still rank water, as out of what remained of the night, a solitary rowboat with two men in it. Yet no one was in that room beneath the clocks, and the dust on the marble floor, and the birds' nests among the rafters, and the gentle whirr of the last bit of machinery that hadn't quite yet run down, remained undisturbed. There was no one to wind the clocks, for who had remained in Perdido when the waters had risen so high? The solitary rowboat plied its stately, solemn course unobserved. It came slowly from the direction of the millowners' fine houses that lay beneath the muddy waters of the Perdido River to the northwest. The boat, which was painted green—for some reason, all such boats in Perdido were painted green—was paddled by a black man about thirty years old. Sitting before him in the prow was a white man, only a few years younger.

Neither had spoken for some time. Each had stared about in wonder at the spectacle of Perdido—where they had been born and where they had been raised—submerged beneath eighteen feet of foul water. What Easter but that first in Jerusalem had dawned so bleakly, or stirred less hope in the breasts of those who had witnessed the rising of that morning's sun?

"Bray," said the white man at last, "row up toward the town hall."

"Mr. Oscar," protested the black man, "we don't know what's in them rooms."

The water had risen to the bottom of the second-floor windows.

"I want to *see* what's in the rooms, Bray. Go on over."

The black man reluctantly turned the boat in the direction of the town hall, and gave a hard, smooth impetus to the paddle. They sailed close. The boat actually bumped against the marble balustrade of the second-floor balcony.

"You not going in!" cried Bray, when Oscar Caskey reached out and grasped one of the thick balusters.

Oscar shook his head. The baluster was covered with the slime of the flood. He attempted to wipe it off on his trousers, but succeeded only in transferring some of the stink.

"Nearer that window."

Bray maneuvered the boat to the first window to the right of the balcony.

The sun hadn't got around to that side of the building yet, and the office—that of the town registrar—was dim. The water lay in a shallow

black pool over most of the floor. Chairs and tables were scattered about, and a number of file cabinets had been toppled. Others, whose thickly packed contents had become sodden with floodwater, had burst open under the pressure of expansion. Thick rotting sheaves of official county and town documents lay scattered everywhere. A rejected application for voting privileges in the 1872 election lay on the windowsill, and Oscar could even make out the name on it.

"What you see, Mr. Oscar?"

"Not much. I see damage. I see trouble ahead when the water goes down."

"This whole town's gone have trouble when the water go down. So let's don't look in no more windows, Mr. Oscar. Don't know what we gone see."

"What could we see?" Oscar turned around and looked at the black man. Bray had worked for the Caskeys since he was eight years old. He had been hired as a playmate to Oscar, then only four; had graduated into an errand boy, and then to the Caskeys' principal gardener. His common-law wife, Ivey Sapp, was the Caskey cook.

Bray Sugarwhite continued to paddle the little green boat down the middle of Palafox Street. Oscar Caskey gazed to the right and the left, and attempted to recollect whether the barbershop had a triangular pediment with a carved wooden ball atop it, or whether that ornament belonged to Berta Hamilton's dress shop. The Osceola Hotel loomed up on the right, fifty yards farther on. Its hanging sign had been dislodged sometime on Friday, and probably by this time, was knocking upside of a shrimp boat five miles out in the Gulf of Mexico.

"We not gone look in any more windows, are we, Mr. Oscar?" said Bray apprehensively as they got nearer the hotel. Oscar in the prow was peering this way and that around the sides of that building.

"Bray, I thought I saw something move in one of those windows."

"That the sun," said Bray quickly. "That the sun on them dirty windows."

"It wasn't a reflection," said Oscar Caskey. "You do like I tell you, and you paddle up to that corner window."

"I'm not gone do it."

"Bray, you are gone do it," said Oscar Caskey, not even turning around, "so don't bother telling me you're not. Just go up to that corner

window."

"I'm not gone look in no more windows," said Bray, not completely under his breath. Then aloud, as he was changing course and paddling nearer the second floor of the hotel, he said, "Pro'bly rats in there. When the water 'gin to rise in Baptist Bottom, I see the rats come up out of their holes, and they run along the top of the fences. Rats know where it's dry. Ever'body get out of Perdido last Wednesday, it was. So not nothing in that hotel but them smart rats."

The boat bumped against the eastern facade of the brick hotel. The sun reflected a blinding red against the glass panes. Oscar peered through the window nearest him.

All the furniture inside the small hotel room—the bed, the dresser, the chifforobe, the washstand, and the hat rack—were jumbled together in the middle of the floor as if thrown together at the center of a maelstrom that had sunk into the first story. All of it was covered with mud. The carpet, muddy and stiff and black, was bunched together in the corner against the door. In the dimness Oscar could not make out the high-water mark on the dark wallpaper.

The carpet trembled, and Oscar saw two large rats rush from a fold of the rug toward the hill of furniture in the center of the room. Oscar jerked his gaze from the window.

"Rats?" asked Bray. "See! I tell you, Mr. Oscar, nothing in this hotel but rats. Don't need to be looking through no more windows."

Oscar Caskey didn't answer Bray, but he stood up, and, grasping the frame of the tattered awning of the next window, he pulled the boat toward the corner of the hotel.

"Bray," said Oscar Caskey, "this is the window where I saw something move. I saw something pass in front of this window, and it wasn't any rat 'cause rats aren't five feet high."

"Rats been feeding on the flood," said Bray, though what he meant to suggest Oscar wasn't certain.

Oscar leaned forward in the boat, grasping the concrete casement of the window with both hands. He peered through the dirty panes.

The corner room appeared to have been untouched by the floodwaters. The bed, quietly made, stood where it ought, against the long corridor wall, and the rug was squarely arranged beneath it. The chifforobe and the dresser and the washstand were in their places. Nothing had fallen to the floor and

broken. However, where the sun, shining through the eastern window, illuminated a large patch of the carpet, Oscar saw that it was sopping wet—so that he was forced to conclude that the water *had* risen through the floorboards.

But why the furniture in this room should have remained so placidly in place while everything in the adjoining chamber had been broken apart and tossed together and—as a last indignity—sheeted in black mud, Oscar could not puzzle out.

"Bray," he said, "I don't know what to make of it."

"Don't you try to make nothing of it," replied Bray. "And I don't know what you talking about anyway, Mr. Oscar."

"Nothing's disturbed in this room. The floor's just wet."

Oscar had turned to speak these last words to Bray, who shook his head and again indicated his wish to be well away from this half-submerged building. He was afraid Oscar would want to circle the hotel and look in every last window.

Oscar turned back in order to push off from the concrete casement. He glanced in the window, and then fell back into the boat with a small strangled cry of alarm.

In that room, which five seconds before had been patently unoccupied, he had seen a woman. She sat quietly on the edge of the bed with her back to the window.

Bray, not waiting for an explanation for Oscar's evident fright—and wanting none—immediately began to paddle off away from the hotel.

"Bray! Go back! Row back!" cried Oscar when he had recovered his voice.

"No, Mr. Oscar, I ain't gone."

"Bray, I'm telling you..."

Bray reluctantly paddled back. Oscar was reaching for the casement when the window shot up in its frame.

Bray stiffened with his paddle in the water. The boat rammed against the brick wall, and the black man and the white man rocked backward and forward with the shock.

"I have waited and waited," said the young woman standing in the open window.

She was tall, thin, pale, erect, and handsome. Her hair was a kind of muddy red, thick, and wound in a loose coil. She wore a black skirt, and a

white blouse. There was a rectangular gold-and-jet brooch at her throat.

"Who are you?" said Oscar in wonder.

"Elinor Dammert."

"I mean," said Oscar, "why are you here?"

"In the hotel?"

"Yes."

"I was caught by the flood. I couldn't get away."

"Ever'body got out of the hotel," said Bray. "They got out or they took 'em out. Last Wednesday."

"They forgot me," said Elinor. "I was asleep. They forgot I was here. I didn't hear them call."

"Town hall bell rang for two hours," said Bray sullenly.

"Are you all right?" asked Oscar. "How long have you been here?"

"As he says, since Wednesday. Four days. I've been sleeping most of the time. Not much else to do when there's a flood. Have you got anything in that boat I can have?"

"To eat?" Oscar asked.

"Got nothing," said Bray shortly.

"There's nothing," said Oscar. "I'm sorry, we should have brought something."

"Why?" asked Elinor. "You didn't expect to find anybody still in the hotel, did you?"

"Surely did not!" said Bray in a tone of voice which suggested that the surprise had in fact been not completely agreeable.

"Hush!" cried Oscar, annoyed by Bray's rudeness, and wondering at it, too. "Are you all right?" he repeated. "What did you do when the water was high?"

"Nothing," replied Elinor. "I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for somebody to come and get me."

"When I first looked in the window, you weren't there. There wasn't anybody in the room."

"I was there," said Elinor. "You just couldn't see me through the window right. There must have been a reflection on the glass. I was just sitting there. I didn't hear you at first."

There was silence a moment. Bray looked at Elinor Dammert with deep mistrust. Oscar bowed his head and tried to puzzle out what to do.

"Is there room for me in that boat?" asked Elinor after a bit.

“Of course!” cried Oscar. “We’ll take you away. You must be starved.”

“Pull the boat around,” said Elinor to Bray, “right under the window, and I’ll climb out.”

Bray did so. Holding on to the awning with one hand, Oscar stood and gave Elinor his other. She lifted her skirt and stepped gracefully out of the hotel window into the boat. Quite at her ease, and giving no indication of the terror she must have felt at being for four days the only occupant of a town that was almost completely submerged, Elinor Dammert squeezed herself in the boat between Oscar Caskey and Bray Sugarwhite.

“Miss Elinor, my name is Oscar Caskey, and this is Bray. Bray works for us.”

“How do you do, Bray?” said Elinor, turning to him with a smile.

“Fine, ma’am,” said Bray in a tone and with a frown that contradicted his words.

“We’ll get you to high ground,” said Oscar.

“Is there room for my things?” said Elinor, as the black man pushed his paddle against the bricks of the Osceola Hotel.

“No,” replied Oscar regretfully, “we are pretty tight in here now. I tell you what, though—soon as Bray gets us to dry land, he can come back here and pick ’em up.”

“I cain’t go inside that place!” Bray protested.

“Bray, you are gone do it!” said Oscar. “You realize what Miss Elinor has just been through for four days? When you and me and Mama and Sister were high and dry? And eating breakfast, dinner, and a little supper and complaining just because we brought two packs of cards away with us instead of four? You realize what Miss Elinor must have been thinking about, all alone in that hotel, with the water rising?”

“Bray,” said Elinor Dammert, “I have just two little bags and I put ’em right beside the window on the floor. All you have to do is reach in.”

. . .

Bray paddled in silence, headed back the way he and Oscar had come. He stared at the back of the young woman who had had no business at all being found where she was found.

Oscar, in the front of the boat, wanted very much to find something to say to Miss Elinor Dammert, but could think of nothing at all—certainly no remark came to mind that would justify his turning right around in the boat

and awkwardly speaking to her over his shoulder. Luckily, as he thought it, the carcass of a large raccoon suddenly bobbed to the surface of the oily black water when they had just passed the town hall, and Oscar explained that pigs, attempting to swim through the floodwater, had slashed their own throats with their forefeet. It was an undetermined point whether they all had drowned or bled to death. Miss Elinor smiled and nodded and said nothing. Oscar said nothing further, and did not turn around again until Bray was paddling past Oscar's own house. "That's where I live," said Oscar, pointing out the second story of the submerged Caskey mansion. Miss Elinor nodded and smiled, and said that it looked like a very big and very pretty house and she wished she could see it sometime when it wasn't underwater. Oscar heartily concurred in that wish; Bray did not. Only a few minutes later Bray ran the boat up between two large exposed roots of a vast live oak that marked the town line to the northwest. Oscar stood out of the boat, balancing on one of the roots, and then helped Elinor on to dry land. Elinor turned to Bray. "Thank you," she said. "I really do 'preciate you going back. Those two bags are all I've got, Bray, and I've got to have them or I've got nothing. I put 'em both right inside the window, and all you have to do is reach inside." Then she and Oscar set out together for the Zion Grace Church, which was on high ground a mile away, where the first families of Perdido had taken refuge.

. . .

A quarter of an hour later, Bray had maneuvered the little boat back against the side of the Osceola Hotel. The water, in even so short a time, had dropped several inches. He sat for several moments just staring at that blank open window, wondering how he would ever get the courage up to stick his arm inside and retrieve the bags. "Hungry!" he cried aloud to himself. "What'd that white woman eat?!" The sound of his own voice strengthened him—even though it had defined a portion of that unpleasant mystery he felt surrounded Elinor Dammert—and he turned the boat so that he could lean his shoulder against the brick wall of the hotel. Holding on to the concrete casement with one hand, he reached his other arm quickly into the room. His hand closed around the handle of a suitcase. He jerked it out of the window and into the boat. He took a deep breath, and thrust his arm in once more.

His hand closed around...nothing.

He jerked it out again. He stared at the sun a moment through squinting eyes, cocked his ear and heard nothing but the scraping of the boat against the orange bricks of the hotel, thrust his hand in again and moved it all about beneath the window inside the room. No second case was there.

Now there was nothing for it but actually to look into the hotel room—to put his head into the blank opening and stare around, looking for Miss Elinor's second bag.

With an unpleasant consciousness that he was the only person in all Perdido at that moment, Bray sat down again in the boat and considered the matter. He might, if he peered into the window, see the case within reach. That, definitely, was the most hopeful possibility, for then he could bring it out almost as simply as he had brought out the other. He might, however, see the case *out* of his reach. This would necessitate climbing through the window. He *would* not do that—but that would be all right, because he could always report to Mr. Oscar that he could not get out of the boat because he had been unable to tether it.

Bray stood up in the boat and steadied himself by grasping the awning. He looked in the window, but could not see the second case at all. It simply wasn't there.

Without thinking, he leaned inside the window and peered all along the outer wall. His fear had been subsumed by curiosity.

"Lord have mercy," he murmured. "Mr. Oscar," he said to himself, rehearsing the speech that would procure pardon for his failure to bring back both bags, "I look all over that room, and it just not there. Would have gone but not no place to tie the boat to, I—"

But there was—a little tongue of painted metal around which the cord of the venetian blind had been wound. Bray cursed his own eyes for picking that out. He knew he couldn't lie to Mr. Oscar, no matter what his fear now, and still cursing his eyes and his inability to tell Mr. Oscar anything but gospel truth, he tied the slender mooring rope of the boat around that tongue of painted metal. When the boat was tethered to the window he carefully raised one foot onto the casement, and in a single slow bound found himself inside the hotel room.

The carpet was sopping wet. Foul floodwater was squeezed from beneath his boots. The morning sunlight poured into the room through the window in the eastern wall. Bray approached the bed where Mr. Oscar had

seen Miss Elinor sitting. Experimentally, he pressed a finger against the spread. It too was sopping—and coated with a black grime. Though he had pressed lightly, foul water formed a dank pool around that finger. “It wasn’t there,” said Bray aloud, still rehearsing the conversation he would have with Mr. Oscar. *Why didn’t you look under the bed?* demanded Mr. Oscar in Bray’s voice.

Bray leaned down. Black grimy water dripped from the fringe of the spread all around. Beneath the bed was a grimy black pool of stinking water. “Lord my Lord! Where’d that white woman sleep?” cried Bray in a whisper. He turned around quickly. No suitcase. He went to the chifforobe and opened it. Nothing was in it but an inch of water in each of the drawers on the left-hand side. There wasn’t a closet in the room or anywhere else for the case to have been hidden—even supposing Miss Elinor had wanted to keep him from finding it, and Miss Elinor had particularly wanted him to fetch it. “Lord, Mr. Oscar! Somebody come and done stole it!”

Bray was already headed back to the window, but Mr. Oscar, in Bray’s voice, demanded now, *Well, Bray, why didn’t you look out in the hall?*

“’Cause,” whispered Bray, “that old room was bad enough...”

The hallway door was closed, but there was a key in the lock. Bray moved over to the door and tried the handle. The door was locked, so he turned the key. The key itself was grimy and black. Bray pulled the door open.

He looked down the long uncarpeted hallway. There was no case. He saw nothing. He paused a moment, waiting for Mr. Oscar’s voice to demand that he go farther. But no voice came. Bray breathed relief, and eased the door closed. He returned to the window and climbed carefully out into the boat. It was while he untied the tethering rope slowly, savoring the notion of his having come through this unpleasant adventure safely, that Bray noticed what he had not seen before: the sunlight shining through the window now illuminated the high-water mark on the dark-papered walls. It was two feet higher than the head of Elinor Dammert’s carefully made bed. If the water had risen so high as that, how had the woman survived?

I: The Flood

Chapter 1

The Ladies of Perdido

The Zion Grace Baptist Church was situated on the Old Federal Road about a mile and a half outside Perdido. Its congregation was Hard-Shell, so the church was about the most uncomfortable sort of structure imaginable: a single whitewashed room with a vaulted ceiling that trapped the heat in the summer and the cold in February; that housed boisterous crickets in winter and flying cockroaches in July. It was an old building, raised on brick pilings some years before the Civil War, and beneath it, in the dark sand, lived sometimes polecats and sometimes rattlesnakes.

The members of the Perdido Hard-Shell congregation were known for three things: their benches, which were very hard; their sermons, which were very long; and their minister, a tiny woman with black hair and a shrill laugh, called Annie Bell Driver. Sometimes people put up with the backless benches and the three-hour sermons simply for the novelty of hearing a woman stand at the front of the church, behind a pulpit, and speak of sin, damnation, and the wrath of God. Annie Bell had an insignificant husband, three insignificant sons, and a girl called Ruthie who was going to grow up to be just like her.

When the waters of the rivers began to rise, Annie Bell Driver threw open the doors of the Zion Grace Church to house any who might be driven from their homes. As it happened, the first to be driven from their homes on that side of town were the three richest families of Perdido—the Caskeys, the Turks, and the DeBordenaves. These three families owned the three sawmills and lumberyards in town, and lumber comprised the whole of Perdido's industry.

So, as the waters of the muddy red Perdido rose over their back lawns, the three rich families of Perdido got wagons and mules from their mills and backed them up to the front porches of their fine houses and filled them with trunks and barrels and crates of food and clothing and valuables. What couldn't be taken away was carried to the tops of the houses. Only the heaviest furniture was allowed to remain on the lower floors, as it was thought that these pieces would survive high water.

The wagons were covered with tarpaulins and driven up through the forest to the church. The families followed in their automobiles and the servants came on foot. Despite the tarpaulins, despite the canvas covering on the automobiles, despite the umbrellas and the newspapers that the servants held atop their heads, despite even the thick canopy of the pine forest itself, everyone and everything arrived soaked with rainwater.

The benches had been moved out of the way and mattresses were brought in and laid out over the floor of the church. The white women got one corner, the black servants got another, the children a third, and the fourth was reserved for the preparation of food. This refuge was an expediency only for the women and children—all the men stayed in town, preserving what they could at the sawmills, helping the merchants raise their wares from the lower shelves to the upper, removing the infirm and persuading the recalcitrant to move to higher ground. When the town was finally abandoned to the waters, the Caskey, Turk, and DeBordenave men and male servants slept in the Driver house, a hundred yards up the road from the church. The children looked on all this business rather as an adventure; the servants looked on it as greater and less pleasant work than they were used to; the rich wives, mothers, and daughters of the millowners said nothing of difficulty and inconvenience, did not mourn their homes and their belongings, smiled for the children and the servants and themselves, and made quite a pet of little Ruthie Driver. The Zion Grace Church had been their home for five days.

. . .

On Easter Sunday morning, Mary-Love Caskey and her daughter, Sister, sat with Annie Bell Driver in the corner of the church. They were the only ones awake in the large room. Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk lay closest to them on adjoining mattresses; they were turned toward each other and snoring lightly. The servants lay with their children in the far corner, now and then stirring, or crying out softly at a dream of high water or water moccasins, or raising a head and looking blearily about for a moment before falling asleep again.

“Stand outside the door,” said Mary-Love quietly to Sister, “and see if you see Bray and your brother coming up the road.”

Sister rose obediently. She was thin and angular, like her widowed mother. Her hair was the usual Caskey hair: fine and strong, but of no particular color, and therefore undistinguished. She was only twenty-seven,

but every woman in Perdido—white or black, rich or poor—knew that Sister Caskey would never marry or leave home.

The wagons with all the Caskey, Turk, and DeBordenave goods had been drawn up before the church and were guarded day and night by one or another of the servants with a loaded shotgun. The DeBordenaves' driver sat sleeping now on the buckboard of the wagon nearest the road, and Sister walked quietly so as not to disturb him. She peered down the wagon track through the pine forest in the direction of Perdido. The sun was just rising over the tall pines and shined in her eyes, but the light in the forest was still dim and green and morning-misty. She craned her head this way and that. The driver stirred on the buckboard, and said, "That you, Miz Caskey?"

"Have you seen Bray and my brother?"

"Haven't seen 'em, Miz Caskey."

"Go on back to sleep then. It's Easter morning."

"The Lord is risen!" the driver cried softly, and lowered his head to his chest.

Sister Caskey shaded her eyes from the watery morning sun that was the color of cheap country butter. A man and a woman stepped through a veil of mist in the forest and paused in the wagon track.

. . .

"Where'd your girl go?" asked Annie Bell Driver.

"Well," said Mary-Love, craning her head. "I told her to walk outside and see if she could see Oscar and Bray. They went into town to see what the damage was. I didn't want them to, Miz Driver. I didn't want them in a rowboat. Oscar since he was little was always trailing his fingers in the water, not thinking about it. There's nothing in the water but water moccasins and leeches, I know it for a fact, so I told Bray to watch out for him. But Bray doesn't pay any attention," Mary-Love finished with a rueful sigh.

Sister appeared in the doorway.

"You see them, Sister?" demanded Mary-Love.

"I see Oscar," said Sister with hesitation.

"Is Bray with him?" asked Mary-Love.

"I didn't see Bray."

"I want to speak to Oscar," said Mary-Love, rising.

"Mama," said Sister. "Oscar's got somebody with him."

"Who is it?"

“It’s a lady.”

“What lady?” Mary-Love Caskey went to the open door of the church and peered out. She saw her son, a hundred feet away in the track-road, standing talking with a woman who was thinner and more angular than Mary-Love herself.

“Who is it, Mama? She’s got red hair.”

“Sister, I don’t know.”

Annie Bell Driver stood behind Mary-Love and Sister. “Is she from Perdido?” the preacher asked.

“No!” cried Mary-Love definitely. “Nobody in Perdido has hair that color!”

. . .

From the live oak where Bray Sugarwhite deposited Oscar Caskey and the rescued Elinor Dammert a wagon track ran through the pine forest. It went past the Zion Grace Church and the Driver house, crossed the Old Federal Road, and ended three miles farther on in a sugarcane camp run by a black family called Sapp.

Oscar Caskey was the first gentleman of Perdido; even in a town so small, that distinction goes for something. He was first gentleman not only by right of birth—being the acknowledged heir of the Caskeys—but also by his appearance and his natural bearing. He was tall and angular, like all the Caskeys, but his movements were looser and more graceful than those of either his sister or his mother. His features were fine and mobile, his speech was careful and elegantly facetious. There was a brightness in his blue eyes, and he seemed always to be suppressing a smile. He had a courtly kind of manner that did not alter according to whom he spoke—he was as courteous to Bray’s common-law wife as he was to the rich manufacturer from Boston who had come to inspect the Caskey lumberyard.

On Easter morning, as Oscar and Elinor walked along, the sun behind them shone through the top branches of the pines. Steam rose out of the dew on the underlying carpet of pine needles, and billowed around them. Great sheets of water, still and steaming, lay now and then in slight depressions on either side of the track where the water table had risen above the level of the ground.

“That’s not river water, that’s groundwater,” Oscar pointed out. “You could get down on your hands and knees like a dog and lap it.” He stiffened suddenly, with the fear that this had perhaps been an impolite suggestion.

To cover up the possible awkwardness, he turned to Miss Elinor and asked, "What did you drink in the Osceola? I believe, Miss Elinor, that it's just not possible to drink floodwater without dying on the spot."

"I didn't have anything to drink at all," replied Elinor. She didn't seem to care that she mystified him.

"Miss Elinor, you went thirsty for four days?"

"I don't go thirsty," said Elinor, smiling. "But I do go hungry." She rubbed her stomach as if to soothe rumblings there, though Oscar had heard none and Miss Elinor certainly did not give the appearance of having gone four days without food. They continued some yards in silence.

"Why were you here?" Oscar asked politely.

"In Perdido? I came for work."

"And what is it you do?"

"I'm a teacher."

"My uncle is on the board," said Oscar eagerly. "Maybe he can get you a job. Why did you come to Perdido? Perdido is out of the way. Perdido is at the end of the earth. Who comes to Perdido except to write me a check for lumber?"

"I guess the flood brought me," Elinor laughed.

"Have you experienced a flood before this?"

"Lots," she replied. "Lots and lots..."

Oscar Caskey sighed. Elinor Dammert was, in some obscure manner, laughing at him. He reflected that she would fit in well in Perdido, if indeed his uncle *did* find her a job at the school. In Perdido all the women made fun of all the men. Those Yankee drummers coming in and staying at the Osceola talked to the men who ran the mills, and shopped in the stores where the men of Perdido stood behind the counters, and had their hair cut —by a man—while they talked to the men who loafed about the barbershop all morning and afternoon long, but they never once suspected that it was really the women who ran Perdido. Oscar wondered if that were the case in other towns of Alabama. It might, he thought, suddenly and terribly, be true everywhere. But men, when they got together, never talked about their powerlessness, nor was it written about in the paper, nor did senators make speeches about it on the floor of Congress—and yet, as he walked beside her through the damp pine forest, Oscar Caskey suspected that if Elinor Dammert was representative of the women of other places (for she must

have come from *some*where), then it was likely that men were powerless in towns other than Perdido as well.

"Where are you from?" he asked, a question which followed naturally in the train of his thought.

"North."

"You're not Yankee!" he exclaimed. Elinor's accent didn't grate like a Northerner's, certainly, for it had Southern rhythms and its vowels were sufficiently liquid for Oscar's ear. But there was something strange about it nonetheless, as though Elinor were more accustomed to some other language—not English at all. He had a sudden mental picture, as strong as it was improbable, of Elinor lying on the bed in the Osceola, listening to the voices of men in the rooms all up and down the hallway, imitating their patterns and storing their vocabularies.

"North Alabama, I mean," she said.

"What town? Do I know it?"

"Wade."

"I do not know it."

"Fayette County."

"Did you go to school?"

"Huntingdon. And I have a certificate to teach. It's in my bag that Bray's getting. I hope he won't let anything happen to my bags. I've got all my credentials in one of 'em." She spoke her concern a little absently—not as if she really cared what happened to the bags, but as if she had suddenly remembered that she *ought* to care.

"Bray is a colored gentleman with a large bump of responsibility," said Oscar, touching his forehead as if to point out where that bump might have raised itself upon Bray's head. "As a younger man, he was apt to shirk his duties, but I beat him over the head with a two-by-four, raised a welt in the proper place, and he's never failed me since." As he spoke these words Oscar suddenly decided, in another part of his brain, that he might charitably and conveniently attribute all Miss Elinor's mysteriousness to mental confusion brought on by four days spent alone in a flooded hotel. "But I still don't understand why you came to *Perdido*," he persisted.

A veil of mist blew away before them and they were suddenly within sight of the church. His sister stood on the front steps, evidently watching out for him.

“Because,” said Elinor with a smile, “I heard there was something here for me.”

. . .

Oscar introduced Elinor Dammert to his mother, his sister, and to the female preacher of the Zion Grace Church.

“No sunrise service this year,” said Annie Bell Driver. “There’s too much trouble in the town. If people can sleep knowing their houses and their chattels are underwater, I say let ’em sleep.”

“Miss Elinor came to Perdido looking for a job in the school for next fall,” said Oscar, “and she got caught in the Osceola when the water started to rise. Bray and I just now found her.”

“Where are your clothes? Where are your things, Miss Elinor?” cried Sister in sympathetic alarm.

“You must have lost everything,” said Mary-Love, staring at Elinor’s hair. “Floodwater takes everything. I’m surprised you got away with your life.”

“I’ve got nothing at all,” said Elinor with a smile that was neither brave resignation nor studied indifference, but a smile that seemed to mock credence.

“Where were you coming from?” asked Annie Bell Driver. One of the children, a colored one, had awakened inside the church and now peered sleepily out the front door.

“I graduated from Huntingdon,” said Elinor Dammert. “I came to teach in the school here.”

“The schoolhouse is underwater,” said Oscar with a sad shaking of his head. “A school of bream have the run of it.”

“I saw two desks floating down Palafox Street,” said Sister Caskey.

“Only thing the teachers saved was their grade books,” said Mary-Love.

“Have you got anything to eat?” asked Elinor. “I’ve been sitting on the side of a bed in the Osceola Hotel for four days watching the water rise. I had one tin of salmon and a box of crackers and I am fainting on my feet.”

“Carry Miss Elinor inside!” cried Annie Bell Driver.

Sister took Elinor’s hand and led her up to the steps of the church. “Bray got some tins out of Mr. Henderson’s store after it was already underwater,” said Sister. “The labels were all washed off so we don’t know what’s in ’em till we open ’em. Sometimes we get green beans for breakfast

and English peas for supper, but you can tell the salmon cans by their shape. ’Course, you won’t have to eat any more salmon unless you want it!”

“Thank you,” said Elinor, turning at the top of the steps, “for rescuing me, Mr. Oscar.”

Oscar would have followed her inside, but his mother touched his arm, saying, “You cain’t go in there, Oscar. Caroline and Manda are still in their nightclothes!”

Oscar watched Miss Elinor disappear, then said goodbye to his mother and turned his steps back onto the road in the direction of the Driver house. He tipped his hat politely to the sleeping driver.

. . .

Elinor was fed on salmon and crackers in the corner of the church. She sat on the end of one of the benches and stared at the little sleeping map of children in the corner opposite. All the servants had risen and were huddled in a distant corner to wash and dress as best they could under the difficult circumstances. Sister Caskey sat beside Elinor, and now and then whispered a question that was answered in a whisper.

Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk had risen in time to see the stranger led inside by Sister Caskey. They dressed quickly and ran out of the church to question Mary-Love, who waited for them on the other side of one of the wagons. The three women fell immediately to a discussion of Elinor Dammert’s muddy red hair and the peculiar circumstance of her having been left for four days in the Osceola Hotel.

Their only conclusion was that the circumstance was something more than just peculiar—it was downright mysterious.

“I wish,” said Caroline DeBordenave, a large woman with a tremulous smile, “that Oscar would come back down the road so that we could ask him a question or two about Miss Elinor.”

“Oscar wouldn’t know anything,” said even larger Manda Turk, whose habitual frown was anything but tremulous.

“Why not?” asked Caroline. “Oscar pulled her out the window of the Osceola Hotel. Oscar rowed her back to dry land. Oscar must have spoken a word or two along the way.”

“Men never know what questions to ask,” replied Manda. “Won’t learn anything asking Oscar about it. Isn’t that right, Mary-Love?”

“It is,” said Mary-Love. “I’m afraid it is, even if I do have to say it about my own son. Sister’s talking to her now. Maybe Sister can get a little

something out of her."

"Here comes Bray," said Manda Turk, pointing down the track into the pine forest. The sun, higher now and warmer, was drawing more steam up from the sodden ground. The black man had appeared quite suddenly out of the mist, swinging a small suitcase in his right hand.

"Is that your bag?" asked Caroline DeBordenave of Mary-Love.

"It is not," replied Mary-Love. "It must be hers."

"Is that her bag, Bray?" Manda Turk called loudly.

"Sure is," replied Bray, coming closer and knowing that "her" referred to the woman who had been rescued from the Osceola.

"What's in it?" asked Caroline.

"Don't know, didn't open it," replied Bray. He paused. "She inside the church?" he asked.

"She's eating her breakfast with Sister," said Mary-Love.

"They was two bags," said Bray, coming up to the three ladies.

"Where is the other?" said Caroline.

"Did you leave it back in the boat?" said Manda.

"Don't know where it is," said Bray.

"You lost it?" cried Mary-Love. "That girl has two bags to her name in this world, and you lost one of 'em!"

"She's gone be mad at you, Bray," said Manda Turk. "She's gone bite your head off!"

Bray shuddered, as if he feared the prediction might prove literally true. "I don't know where that old thing is, Miz Turk. Mr. Oscar and me get that lady in the boat, and she say two bags sitting inside the window. I bring that lady and Mr. Oscar out here, and Mr. Oscar tell me, 'Bray, row back,' so I row back and I reach in that window, and they one bag there. Only one bag. Now, where the other one go?"

None of the women ventured an answer to Bray's question. The black man handed the bag to Mary-Love. "Maybe something reach up out of the water and put a hand inside the window feeling around and it feel that bag and it pull it down under the water."

"Nothing in that water but old dead chickens," said Manda Turk contemptuously.

"Wonder what's in there," mused Caroline, nodding at the case in Mary-Love's hand.

Mary-Love shook her head. To Bray she said, “Bray, you go on down to Miz Driver’s house and get you something to eat. I’ll tell Miss Elinor you did what you could.”

“Oh, thank you, Miz Caskey, I don’t want to say nothing to her...”

He pulled away from the tree against which he had been leaning and went hurriedly down the track. The three women looked down at Elinor Dammert’s remaining bag—a weathered black leather case with straps going all around it—and then went inside the church.

. . .

It didn’t matter to Elinor Dammert, evidently, that one of her bags had been lost. She didn’t blame Bray; she didn’t suggest that he had dropped the bag into the water and then lied about it; she didn’t wonder if someone else in a rowboat might have passed the hotel, reached in and filched it; she didn’t seem to upset herself over the loss of half of what little she had in the world. She said merely, “It had my books in it. And my teacher’s certificate. And my diploma from Huntingdon. And my birth certificate. I’ll have to write for duplicates. Does that take long?” she asked Sister. Sister had no idea, but supposed that it might.

“I’d like to wash up and change my clothes,” Elinor said.

“There’s nowhere for that,” said Sister. “We bring water up from the branch.”

“Oh, of course,” said Miss Elinor, quite as if she knew every foot of its watery length.

“The branch down behind the church,” said Caroline DeBordenave, as if Miss Elinor had asked *What branch?* —as she ought to have. “You cain’t see it ’less you know where to look.”

“Didn’t it flood, too?” Elinor asked.

“No, ma’am,” replied Miz Driver. “Land back of here slopes off quickly. All the water runs right down to the Perdido. That branch is clean and clear.”

“Good,” said Elinor, “then I’ll go down and bathe.”

She got up immediately, and Sister would have shown her the way, but Elinor assured her that she would be able to find it without assistance. Elinor stepped quietly among the still-sleeping children and walked out the back door carrying her weathered black bag with her.

Manda Turk and Mary-Love and Caroline DeBordenave fell upon Sister.

"What'd she say?" demanded Manda, speaking for all.

"Nothing," said Sister, realizing in a sudden moment of shame that she had failed in what these three women evidently considered to be her duty. "I told her about the school and about Perdido. She was asking about the flood, you know, and the mills, and who everybody was and so forth."

"Yes, but what did you ask *her?*" demanded Caroline.

"I asked her if she thought she was gone drown."

"Drown?" said Mary-Love. "Sister, you are impossible!"

"Drown in the Osceola," said Sister defensively. She was sitting on the end of the bench, and the three women stood ranged before her. "She said she wasn't scared, not a bit—that she wasn't gone drown ever in her life."

"And that's *all* you found out?" cried Manda.

"That's all," said Sister, cringing. "What was I supposed to find out? Nobody told me—"

"You were supposed to find out *everything*," said her mother.

Caroline DeBordenave shook her head slowly. "Don't you see, Sister?"

"See what?"

"See that there's something peculiar."

"See that there's something *wrong*," Manda amended.

"I don't!"

"You must," said Mary-Love. "Just look at her hair! You ever see hair that was that color? Looks like she had it dyed in the Perdido—that's what it looks like to me!"

. . .

Annie Bell Driver knew what was going on. She had watched the three richest women in Perdido surround Bray and question him closely about the black bag he had carried; she had seen them turn their questions on poor meek Sister. She also knew where those questions tended. While Sister was vainly attempting to justify her failure to have found out anything of substance as a reluctance to pry, Annie Bell Driver slipped out the back door of the church, and with something in her head that wasn't as clearly defined a motive as "curiosity," she picked her way carefully down the slippery slope of pine needles, grabbing for balance at one resinous pine trunk after another. Steam rose here, too—in wisps from the ground, from the underbrush, from the green boughs of the pines, and almost in billows from the stream itself.

The branch was shallow, narrow, clear, and quick—quite unlike the dark, deep waters of the Blackwater and the Perdido. It made its way through the pine forest in a course that changed markedly every year, it seemed. It tore away the carpet of pine needles and left bare the soft shale beneath, hollowing out channels in the stone, throwing up diminutive islands of sand and pebbles.

Annie Bell Driver stood on the edge of the branch—it was too volatile a stream to have built up anything like a bank—and looked up and down what she could see of its length. There was a turn into the forest about a hundred feet up, and another turn in the opposite direction about fifty feet down. The woman with the muddy-red hair wasn't to be seen. Annie Bell wondered whether she should walk upstream or downstream or return to the church, leaving the woman to her privacy. After all, having remained four days in the top floor of a half-submerged hotel, she would not have had an opportunity for washing except in the floodwaters—and that was an expedient which was no expedient at all, for it left one only dirtier than before, and was decidedly unhealthful.

Annie Bell decided to walk around the downstream bend, and turned in that direction. It was only then she noticed Elinor Dammert's black bag resting at one end of a sandbar directly across the water from where she stood. She had not noticed it before because it blended in so well with the rank vegetation on the opposite side of the branch.

The thought passed suddenly through her mind that Elinor Dammert, having survived the flooding of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers, had drowned in this tiny unnamed branch, but then she realized that in order to drown, one must first find a spot deep enough to cover one's head completely, and such spots were rare in the length of this shallow course. It was, in fact, so notoriously safe a stream that Annie Bell had never warned even her youngest children against using it. It wasn't deep enough to drown them, and it was too quick-moving to breed moccasins and leeches.

But if her bag was here, and she couldn't possibly be drowned, then where was Elinor Dammert?

Annie Bell Driver took two steps downstream and was reaching for a pine branch to lift her over a patch of soggy ground when she stopped suddenly. Her foot dropped to the earth and sank in until the water seeped through the holes for her laces.

There, beneath the water in a narrow trench that seemed to have been specially carved for her body, lay Elinor Dammert, quite naked. She clutched a clump of water weeds with each hand, but was perfectly still.

"Good Lord above!" cried Annie Bell Driver aloud. "She has gone and drowned herself!"

She stared. Though the water was clear and only deep enough to cover the body, it had worked a kind of visual transformation: Miss Elinor's skin seen through that rapidly running water seemed leathery, greenish, tough—and Miss Elinor's skin, Miz Driver had noted, was of a pellucid whiteness. Moreover, even as the preacher stared, a distorting transformation seemed to come over the features of the other woman's submerged face. While before it had been handsome and narrow and fine-featured, now it seemed wide and flat and coarse. The mouth stretched to such an extent that the lips seemed to disappear altogether. The eyes beneath their closed lids grew into large, circular domes. The lids themselves became almost transparent, and the dark slit was set directly across the bulging eyeball like a pen-drawn Equator on a child's globe.

She wasn't dead.

The thin, stretched lids over those protuberant domes drew slowly apart and two immense eyes—the size of hen's eggs, Miz Driver thought wildly—stared up through the water and met the gaze of the Hard-Shell preacher.

Annie Bell Driver fell back against a tree. The branch she had been holding on to above her head snapped.

Elinor rose in the water. The transformation she had undergone beneath the running water held, and Miz Driver found herself staring at a vast, misshapen grayish-green creature with a slack body and an enormous head with cold staring eyes. The pupils were vertical and thin as pencil lines. Then, as the water poured off, back into the branch, Elinor Dammert stood before her, smiling sheepishly and blushing prettily in her modesty at being so discovered without her clothing.

Miz Driver took a deep breath and said, very quietly, "I'm so dizzy..."

"Miz Driver!" cried Miss Elinor. "Are you all right?" The muddiness seemed to have been washed from her hair. It was now a dark, intense red—like nothing so much as a clay bank shining in the brilliant sun that follows a July rainstorm, and nobody in Perdido knew anything that was redder than *that*.

“I’m all right,” said Annie Bell Driver weakly. “But, law, you scared me! What were you doing down in that water, girl?”

“Oh!” Elinor said in a light, smiling voice, “after going through a flood there’s just no other way to get clean—I know it for a fact, Miz Driver!”

She took a step upward and back onto the sandbar on which her bag had been placed, and if Miz Driver hadn’t still been so dizzy she would have been more certain that when Miss Elinor lifted her other foot out of that branch, it was not white and slender as was the one already braced upon the sand, but instead looked altogether different—wide and flat and gray and webbed.

Oh, but that was just the water! thought Annie Bell Driver, shutting her eyes tightly.

Chapter 2

The Waters Recede

James Caskey, Oscar's uncle and Mary-Love's brother-in-law, was a quiet, sensitive, fastidious man to whom trouble came easily and left grudgingly. He was slender ("bony," some said), mild, and quite well-off, at least by the standards of a small town in a poor county of an impoverished state. He was unhappily married, but his wife Genevieve, to Perdido's relief, spent most of her time with a married sister in Nashville. He had a six-year-old daughter called Grace, and he had—despite the possession of that wife and daughter—the reputation of being marked with "the stamp of femininity." He lived in the house his father had built in 1865. This had been the first substantial home raised in Perdido, though by current standards it was modest: just two parlors, a dining room, and three bedrooms—all on the same floor. The kitchen, which had originally been detached, had now been annexed to the house by the construction of a long addition, containing a nursery, a sewing room, and two bathrooms. The house was old-fashioned, with high ceilings, large square rooms, brick fireplaces, and dark wainscoting, but James's mother had had taste, and the place was well furnished. Now, James did not know what remained to him in the house which had lain seven days wholly submerged beneath the muddy water of the upper Perdido. When Bray rowed him through town, James Caskey could tell where his house was only by looking at his sister's house next door (which was two-storied) and by the brick chimney of the kitchen, which was higher than those of the parlors.

James, however, had given little thought to the contents of his house, though he loved every stick of his mother's furniture, loved everything that had belonged to her. He had to think of the mill, whose loss, whether total or only temporary, meant hardship for the whole community. The Caskey mill, owned jointly by James and Mary-Love and run jointly by James and Mary-Love's son Oscar, employed three hundred and thirty-nine men and twenty-two women, white and colored, ranging in age from seven to eighty-one—these last a great-grandson and a great-grandfather who stenciled the Caskey trefoil onto the boards of the company's specialty woods: the pecan, oak, cypress, and cedar. Because these three hundred and sixty-one persons

would suffer greatly if the mill could not be brought back quickly into operation, James Caskey had Bray row him over to the still submerged mill so he could see what, if anything, might be done.

James Caskey's rickety frame made him appear frail, a general impression intensified by his movements, which were habitually slow and deliberate and displayed (as far as was consonant with a body that tended to jerkiness) some amount of flaccid grace. He certainly had never spent much time in the Caskey forests, and it was suspected that he didn't know as much about trees as a Caskey ought to know. His disinclination to tramp about forests and have his boots muddied, his trousers ripped with briars, and his way impeded with rattlesnakes was well-known, but he was a splendid worker in the office, and no one in town could compose a better resolution or draft a subtler letter. When the town proposed incorporation to the state legislature, James Caskey represented Perdido before that assembly, and after a fine speech there it was universally wondered why the man had never gone into politics.

James's examination of the mill-yard showed the Caskey warehouses in deplorable condition. Even those that were closed were ruined, for the water-soaked wood had buckled and warped. The lumber in the open sheds had all floated away to God only knew where. Inventory appeared a complete loss. The offices were wrecked too, but James had had the sense to fill two wagons with records current and immediately past, and these had been taken to higher land. They lay now under hay in the barn belonging to a potato farmer, but the mill had lost all records of everything before the year 1895. Tom DeBordenave was in a much worse fix however, for he had opted to save lumber before records; the lumber was lost anyway, for the barn in which it had been stored had eventually washed away as well, and now he had no record of bills outstanding, of future orders, or even of addresses of his best Yankee customers.

After a couple of hours being rowed uselessly about his submerged mill and calling out commiserations to Tom DeBordenave, who was in another little green boat, looking over his adjoining property, James Caskey was taken back past his submerged house to the forest track that led to the Zion Grace Baptist Church. Bray, of course, had already told him of the strange appearance of the red-haired woman in the Osceola Hotel, and he had heard the same story from his nephew. James was more than a little curious to see her. No one in Perdido had talked about anything but the

flood for so long that he was glad of the opportunity to hear about something that had nothing to do with water.

That Miss Elinor had remained the night at the Zion Grace Baptist Church he knew from Bray, because Bray had fetched another mattress from Annie Bell Driver's house. James Caskey hoped that Miss Elinor would be sitting out in front of the church when he walked past; that would save the subterfuge of seeking out Mary-Love or Sister or his daughter inside the church and bringing the conversation and the introductions gradually around to the rescued young woman.

Bray tied the little green boat to the exposed root of a tree at the edge of the floodwater—it had already subsided to such an extent that when they emerged on to dry land they were still within sight of Mary-Love's house on the edge of the town line. Mr. James and Bray walked rather quickly through the springy, damp forest.

After a few minutes of silence Bray, who was walking in one wagon track while Mr. James walked in the other, ventured the opinion that Mr. James would be better off "if he left that lady alone."

"Why you say that?" asked James curiously.

"I say that 'cause I know what I say."

James shrugged, and replied, "Bray, I don't believe you know what you are talking about."

"I do, Mr. James, I do!" cried Bray, but there was an end to the argument. Mr. James wasn't going to lengthen it by demanding specifics of Bray, and Bray wasn't going to volunteer any hard information on Miss Elinor for the simple reason that he hadn't any; and he wasn't going to tell any of his suspicions either, which were notably formless and might—if Miss Elinor proved to be nothing more than what she appeared to want to appear—reflect badly upon Bray.

After all the chilly floodwater that had passed beneath Bray's little boat, the forest seemed warm and dry and safe. James Caskey walked along smiling, turning his head quickly when he heard quail call, trying to see them but not succeeding.

"That her," said Bray in a hoarse whisper when they came within sight of the Zion Grace Church.

Elinor Dammert sat on the front steps of the church with James's daughter Grace huddled in her lap—it was almost as if she had been waiting for him there and had secured Grace in order to facilitate their meeting.

Bray hurried on toward the Driver house, but James, thanking the colored man for his trouble that afternoon, went up to the church and introduced himself to Elinor Dammert.

"You're visiting Perdido at a bad time," he remarked. "We cain't offer you but a poor sort of hospitality."

Elinor smiled. "There are worse things than a little high water."

"Is that child bothering you? Grace, are you bothering Miss Elinor?"

"She's not," said Elinor. "Grace likes me pretty well."

Grace hugged Elinor's neck to show her father how much she liked the new young woman.

"Oscar told me you lost all your money in the flood."

"I did. It was in my case, along with my certificates and diplomas."

"That's a real shame. I blame Bray. But we can get you on the Hummingbird back to Montgomery, at least."

"Montgomery?"

"Isn't that where you come from?"

"Went to school there. Huntingdon. I come from Wade, up in Fayette County."

"Send you back to Wade, then," said James with a smile. "Doesn't Grace want to see her daddy?" he said, unfolding his arms with a jerk that might have put one in mind of a child's jumping jack.

"No!" cried Grace, holding more tightly still to Elinor.

"You must think I've got someplace to go," said Elinor over Grace's shoulder.

"Not Wade?"

"That's where my people are from. All my people are dead," said Elinor Dammert, squeezing the child in her arms.

"I'm sorry. What will you do, then?" James Caskey asked solicitously.

"I came to Perdido because I heard there was a place in the school. If there is one, then I'll stay and teach."

"You know who you should ask, don't you?" said Grace from the arms that encircled her.

"Who should she ask, Grace?" said James.

"You!" cried Grace. Then, turning to Elinor: "Daddy's head of the board."

"That's right," said James. "So you should be asking me."

"That's who I'll ask then. I heard there was a vacancy."

“There wasn’t,” said James, “at least not before the flood.”

“How do you mean?”

“Edna McGhee was teaching fourth grade—been teaching fourth grade for six years, I believe—but she told me night before last that she and Byrl were leaving town, that they weren’t waiting around for the next flood to come and sweep them all down to Pensacola on the back of a love seat. So if Edna and Byrl leave town like they say they are, we’ve got nobody to teach fourth grade.”

“Except me,” said Elinor. “I would be happy to teach fourth. But you ought to remember, Mr. Caskey, I’ve lost my certificates and my diploma.”

“Oh, said James with a smile, “but that was our fault, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it, Grace?”

Grace nodded her head vigorously, and threw her arms around Elinor’s neck.

. . .

James stayed at the church for an hour more, talking only briefly with Mary-Love about the state of the mill, but speaking at great and evidently congenial length with Miss Elinor, who *wouldn’t* put poor Grace down. He took his leave—with considerable reluctance—only when Tom DeBordenave and Henry Turk sent a man after him; the three millowners needed to talk concertedly about what was to be done now. Mary-Love told Sister it was absolutely scandalous that when James finally *did* go away he consigned his daughter to the care of the redheaded stranger, while his sister-in-law and his niece had stood in plain sight! “Mama,” said Sister, “you look at Grace, she won’t leave Miss Elinor alone! Miss Elinor has got a friend for life!”

Mary-Love, who had exhibited no desire to become intimate with Miss Elinor the previous evening or earlier that morning, now could hardly be brought to speak to the young woman—and wouldn’t have allowed Sister to do so either, had not the desire for concrete information regarding Miss Elinor’s antecedents and intentions been of overwhelming moment. When Sister brought her mother the news (obtained in one corner of the church, and delivered in another) that James was going to try to get Miss Elinor a place in the school, Mary-Love sighed deeply, and sat down on the hard bench with the air and the motion of a fighter who has just had all the wind knocked out of him in a single cruel blow. “Oh, Sister,” said Mary-Love in a low moaning voice, “I knew she would do it...”

“Do what, Mama?”

“Worm her way in. Bore her way in. Dig right down in the mud of Perdido until she couldn’t be dragged out again by seventeen men pulling on a rope that was tied around her neck—and I just wish it were!”

“Mama,” cried Sister, looking around to where Elinor sat—quite demurely—talking to Miz Driver and still holding Grace Caskey upon her lap, “you are being hard on her, and I don’t think she deserves it!”

“Just wait, Sister,” said Mary-Love, “just wait and tell me that again in six months.”

That night—not late, for when there was so much to do during the daylight that could not be accomplished in darkness, everyone went to sleep early—Oscar Caskey and his uncle James lay together in the bed that was usually occupied by Annie Bell Driver and her insignificant spouse. The Driver house was crowded with men, colored and white, very well-off and very poor, very old and quite young (although the youngest remained with their mothers in the church), so that every chamber was filled with mattresses and snoring.

Two of Miz Driver’s sons slept on the floor at the foot of their parents’ bed breathing noisily through their mouths, so when Oscar raised himself on his elbow and spoke to his uncle it was in a whisper.

“What are you gone do about Miss Elinor?” Oscar asked. “Mama told me you spent the morning with her. The *whole* morning, Mama said.”

“Well, she’s a nice girl,” remarked James. “And I feel bad about what happened to her. Trapped in the Osceola, her bag gone, no money, no certificate, no job, no place to go. She is as bad off as anybody in this town—in fact, worse than most!”

“I know it,” said Oscar softly. “I cain’t understand why Mama took such a whole-cloth disliking to her. Makes things hard.”

“Mary-Love doesn’t want me to do anything,” James agreed, tapping a bony finger against Oscar’s pillow next to Oscar’s nose. “Mary-Love doesn’t want me to address another word in Miss Elinor’s direction.”

“But you are gone do something, aren’t you, James?”

“Of course, I am! I’m gone get her a job. She’s gone be teaching in September. In fact, she may have to start as soon as we get the school back open, because I don’t think Byrl and Edna McGhee are even gone try to clean up their house, though I don’t think there’s probably more than two feet of mud on their kitchen floor. If they go—and Edna’s got people in

Tallahassee who'll take her and Byrl in right now—then Miss Elinor can start at the school right away."

"Well, that's good," said the younger man, and looked over his uncle's shoulder at the rising moon through the window. "But where is she gone live? She cain't go back to the Osceola—they charge two dollars a day. A fourth-grade teacher doesn't make that kind of money—not two dollars a day and having to buy food, too."

"I've already thought about it, Oscar," said James. "And what I've decided is—she's gone stay with Grace and me."

"What?" Oscar exclaimed so loudly that the Driver boys paused in their snoring as if to hear more or perhaps in order to incorporate the exclamation into their dreams. "What?" Oscar repeated in a far softer voice when the boys' snoring had resumed.

"When we get the house cleaned up, I mean," said James. "Grace loves Miss Elinor to death, and hasn't known her since yesterday morning."

"She's gone live with you!"

"We got room," said Oscar. "There's Grace, that loves her."

"James, what about Genevieve? What you imagine Genevieve is gone say when she comes back from Nashville and sees Miss Elinor sitting on the front porch with Grace in her lap?"

James Caskey turned over, away from his nephew. He didn't answer.

"What you gone say to Genevieve, James?" demanded Oscar in a whisper. "And for that matter, what you gone say to Mama?"

"Lord!" said James after a time, stretching his feet against the iron bars at the foot of the bed, "aren't you tired, Oscar? Aren't you worn out? I am. I *got* to get to sleep or I'm not gone be able to get up in the morning at all!"

. . .

The sun shone bright and hot all day Easter and for the next three days. The floodwaters evaporated or they ran down to the Gulf of Mexico or they sank into the sodden earth.

The inhabitants of Perdido came down from high ground into the town and slogged up to the doors of their homes to find that the mud had got inside, that their heaviest and best pieces of furniture had floated up to the ceiling, and later when the water receded, had been left in broken heaps on the floor. Mortar had washed out of brick foundations, and every board that had lain underwater was warped. Porches had collapsed. The rigid limbs of pigs and calves stuck out of the muck in everyone's front yard. There were

drowned chickens on the stairs. Machinery of all kinds was clogged with sludge, and though patient little colored girls were set to the task of cleaning, all the mud was never to be got out again. Gas tanks and oil drums had floated out of the mill storage yards and smashed through the windows of houses, as if on purpose to wreak the greatest damage possible. Half the stained-glass windows of the churches had been broken. Hymnbooks in their racks on the backs of pews had become so saturated with water that they had, in their expansion, split the wood. The works of the new pipe organ at the Methodist church were filled with mud. There wasn't a single shop on Palafox Street that didn't lose its entire stock. And there wasn't a square foot of property in the entire town that didn't stink—of river mud and dead things and rotting clothing, rotting wood, and rotting food.

The National Guard and the Red Cross had arrived before the floodwaters had receded, bringing blankets and cans of pork and beans and newspapers and medicine to the encampments that surrounded the town. The National Guard remained a week longer than the Red Cross and assisted the mill workers in clearing away the largest pieces of wreckage. It was estimated by James Caskey, Tom DeBordenave, and Henry Turk that the three mills combined had lost a million and a half board feet of pine—warped, washed down to the Gulf, or simply come to rest and rot in the submerged forest around Perdido.

The worst-hit portion of town was Baptist Bottom. Half the houses had been totally destroyed; the remainder were severely damaged. Those blacks who had had so little before the flood now possessed nothing at all. These unfortunate householders were the first assisted. Mary-Love and Sister and Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk spent all day at the Bethel Rest Baptist Church feeding colored children rice and peaches, when they might have been at home superintending the cleaning of their own houses.

The homes of the workers were water-damaged, but for the most part intact. The homes of the shopkeepers, dentists, and young lawyers had fared best, for they had been built on the highest ground in Perdido, and some had escaped with no more than a foot of water on the carpets—not enough even to upset the chairs.

The houses of the millowners, built so near the river, had suffered of course, but the waters there had not reached more than a few inches past the level of the second floor, and most of the household belongings that had been stored upstairs were intact. However, James Caskey's single-story

home seemed nearly a total loss. Because the house was built in a slight depression and stood nearer the river than any other house on the street, it had lain longer beneath the floodwaters than any other structure in town. It was the first to be inundated, the last to be dry.

The schoolhouses, which were on the river just south of the Osceola Hotel, had suffered considerable damage as well, and the remainder of the school year was canceled, though fully a month of classes remained. The children, thus unexpectedly released, had unexpected brooms and pails put into their hands, and they did their part to setting the school to rights. But, though Edna McGhee and her husband had indeed moved away from Perdido and were now sending postcards from Tallahassee with some regularity, Elinor hadn't yet been called upon to take her place. Under James Caskey's recommendation, Elinor had been unanimously accepted by the school board. It hadn't even been thought necessary to write off to Huntingdon College for a copy of her certification. After all, it had been lost in the flood, along with so many other of the young lady's belongings. The school board felt that it would be adding insult to injury for Perdido to demand that Elinor Dammert produce what Perdido had taken away.

What was discovered in the months following the flood was that not everything could be put to rights, no matter what amount of effort was expended in the attempt. Washing tins of food under cold running water, for instance, did not entirely guard against botulism—or so everyone had been warned by the Red Cross—and all the stocks of the two groceries and the fancy foods store had to be jettisoned; this at a time when there wasn't as much food as people were accustomed to. Great piles of warped lumber from the three yards were dragged into the cypress swamp in which the Blackwater River had its source five miles northeast of Perdido. It was left there to rot and be out of everyone's way, though the following autumn it was discovered that many of these logs and boards had been laboriously dragged back to Perdido in order to rebuild Baptist Bottom, the houses of which, because of the warped boards, looked more crooked than ever before. Fine carpets had to be thrown out because they could not be cleaned of the stain of river mud. Books and documents and pictures had been severely water-stained—even those that had been above the high-water line were not unaffected—and only those that were necessary (such as deeds in the town hall and prescriptions at the druggist's) were retained.

But the flood wasn't all bad, they would say later. When it cut off the town's water supply for several days, the citizens of Perdido understood the inadequacy of their present system and quickly voted an expenditure of forty thousand dollars to build a new pumping station on the nearest two acres of land that hadn't been flooded. Because everyone's yard was torn up and most of the streets had been washed away, it seemed the appropriate time to install a modern sewage system—and so, with money borrowed from the owners of the three mills, new sewers were laid into the ground all over the town. Even Baptist Bottom was not forgotten in these improvements, and for the first time there were streetlamps to illuminate the tin roofs of the shacks at night.

Perdido was forgotten by all but the Baldwin County legislator who tried, unsuccessfully, to get loans in Montgomery, and by several firms in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania who had placed orders with one of the mill companies and now learned how late those orders would be delivered. But the effects of the flood remained a long while in Perdido, months and months after the waters had receded, even after the sewer lines had been laid and the new pumping station was drawing up the coldest and sweetest water that anyone in town had ever tasted. The stink of the flood never entirely went away, it seemed. Even after the slime had been swept out of the houses, the walls scrubbed down, new carpets laid, new furniture bought, new curtains hung; even after every ruined thing had been carted away and burned and the broken branches and rotting carcasses of dead animals had been washed out of the yards and grass had begun to grow again, Perdido would start up the stairs last thing at night and pause with its hand on the banister, and beneath the jasmine and the roses on the front porch, beneath the leftover pungency of supper from the kitchen, and beneath the starch in its own collar—Perdido would smell the flood. It had seeped into the boards and beams and very bricks of the houses and buildings. Now and then, it would remind Perdido of what desolation there had been, and what desolation might very well come upon the town again.

Chapter 3

Water Oak

During the five days that Miss Elinor spent at the Zion Grace Church, she had made herself as useful as possible, keeping the children, doing a little cooking, cleaning the church, washing the bedclothes, and complaining not at all. She had won the admiration of everyone but Mary-Love, and Mary-Love's antipathy toward Miss Elinor was a subject of some remark. For lack of any better reason, it was ascribed to family pride—Mary-Love had seen what inroads Miss Elinor had made into the affection of Grace and the esteem of James Caskey, and possibly saw this as a dangerous disruptive element in her family. That, at any rate, was the least illogical possibility—though it was only a hypothesis; the real cause was probably something else altogether. No one thought to ask Mary-Love directly why she didn't like Miss Elinor, but, as it happened, she wouldn't have known what to answer. The truth was, she didn't know. It was, Mary-Love confusedly told herself, Miss Elinor's red hair—by which she meant: it was the way Miss Elinor looked, it was the way Miss Elinor talked, carried herself, picked up Grace, made friends of Miz Driver, and had even learned to distinguish among Roland, Oland, and Poland Driver—the female preacher's three insignificant sons—and who had ever done that before? Such energy expended in a strange community seemed to indicate a firm purpose at work—and what could Miss Elinor's purpose be?

"I am sorry for that child," said Mary-Love emphatically as she and Sister sat rocking on the front porch, peering through the screen of dead-looking camellias to James's house and watching for Elinor Dammert to appear at one of the windows. Mary-Love and Sister had been back in their house for nearly two weeks, and still the stink of the flood wasn't out of everything.

"What child, Mama?" Sister was embroidering a pillowcase with green and yellow thread. So much linen had been ruined!

"Little Grace Caskey, *that's* what child! Your tiny cousin!"

"Why you feel sorry for Grace? She does fine as long as Genevieve stays away."

“That’s what I mean,” said Mary-Love. “For all intents and purposes, James has got rid of that woman, I am thankful to say. James had no business being married in the first place. James was not cut out for marriage, and he should have known it as well as everybody else in this town knew it. You could have knocked the entire population of Perdido down with a feather—the *same* feather—when James Caskey came back here with a wife in a sleeping compartment. Sometimes I think James was smart, and signed a paper with Genevieve that said she could come to Perdido, get pregnant, leave him a baby, and then go away again forever. I wouldn’t be surprised if he signs a check every month to the liquor store in Nashville giving Genevieve an open account. An open account at a liquor store would keep Genevieve in Moose Paw, Saskatchewan!”

“Mama,” said Sister patiently, “I never ever heard of that place.” It was the habit of mother and daughter to maintain contradictory stances on any question: if Mary-Love were excited, then Sister remained calm. If Sister waxed indignant, then Mary-Love became conciliatory. The technique had developed over the course of many years, and now was so natural to them that they did it without thinking or willing it to be so.

“I made it up. But, Sister, James got rid of that woman—we don’t know how, we are just grateful that he did—and what does he do first chance he gets?”

“What?”

“He takes in another who’s just as bad!”

“Miss Elinor?” asked Sister in a voice which suggested she didn’t think the comparison was justified.

“You knew who I was talking about, Sister.”

It was hard to rock steadily on the front porch now that so many of the floorboards had been warped. Grady Henderson’s Fancy Goods Store had brought in a shipment of scented candles, which were bought up immediately. One of them burned now in a saucer on the floor between Mary-Love and Sister; its scent of vanilla did something to cover the rankness of the river soil that had been deposited all around the house. Bray and three men from the mill, which wasn’t yet back in operation, were systematically turning over all the dirt in the front yard, burying what had been laid down by the flood.

“Mama, your voice carries. Don’t let Miss Elinor hear you.”

“She won’t hear me unless she’s listening at the window,” replied Mary-Love, in an even louder voice. “And I wouldn’t be in the least surprised if she were!”

“What don’t you like about her?” asked Sister mildly. “I like her. I don’t see any reason not to like her, to tell you the truth, Mama.”

“I do. I see every reason in the world.” Mary-Love paused a moment, then suggested: “She has red hair.”

“Lots of people have red hair. That McCall boy I went to school with —you remember him?—who died at Verdun last year, he had red hair. You told me you liked him.”

“Oh, not like this woman, Sister! You ever see a color like hers? A color like Perdido mud? *I* never have. Besides, it’s not just the red hair.”

“What is it, then?”

“Where did she come from? Why did she come to Perdido? What does she want? How did she get James to ask her to come and live with him? Has James ever asked any other young lady to sit at his table?”

“No, Mama, of course not. But Miss Elinor answered all those questions. Oscar told you all the answers. She came from Fayette County, and she came down here to teach. She heard there was an opening.”

“There wasn’t!”

“Then she was wrong, Mama, but there’s an opening now. Miz McGhee has already sent three postcards from Tallahassee. That’s what I heard.”

“She *made* that opening.”

“She didn’t, Mama. How can you say that? The flood made that opening. High water caused that vacancy in the schoolroom!”

Mary-Love frowned and stood from her chair. “I haven’t seen her pass a window in ten minutes. I wonder what she’s doing in there? I’ll bet she’s plundering drawers!”

“She’s helping clean up. James told me he had never seen anybody work as hard as she did in a house that wasn’t her own.”

Mary-Love sat down again and began plying her needle furiously. “You know what I think, Sister? I think she gone try to talk James into getting a divorce from Genevieve so she can take right over. That’s why she’s working so hard on that house—because she thinks it’s gone be hers! A divorce! Can you even think of it, Sister?”

“Mama, you cain’t stand Genevieve.”

"Well, I don't think James should get a divorce. I think Genevieve should die or go away forever. What does James need with a wife? James has got little Grace—now is that child *sweet?* And he has got you and me and Oscar right next door. If James wanted, I would cut down every last one of these camellia bushes—they're practically dead now anyway—and he could see us every time he looked out the window. You know what kind of thing makes James happy? Buying silver. I have seen him do it. He sees a cake knife he doesn't have, his face *shines*. A fish slicer?—the same thing, a shining face. Now, with all that, not to mention the mill to keep him busy and raising a little girl, what on earth does he need a wife for?"

It was a peculiar thing that no scandal was breathed in the length and width of Perdido over the fact that James Caskey, a well-off man who was mercifully separated from his wife, had invited a very pretty, unattached, and penniless young woman to share his home. The people of Perdido looked at it this way: here was a teacher come to town, whose money and certificates and clothing had been lost in the flood. She needed a place to stay until she got on her feet. James Caskey had this big house with at least two extra bedrooms in it and he had a little girl who could use a woman around to teach her manners, and with his wife off in Nashville doing nobody-dared-suggest-what, James himself needed somebody to talk to at supper. At the same time, everybody whistled and wondered what Genevieve would say, if only Genevieve knew. Elinor Dammert was smart; people could tell that just by looking at her. And Elinor Dammert probably had a temper; anybody with hair *that* color had a temper. But whether Elinor Dammert could stand up to Genevieve Caskey was a question charitable people hoped would never be put to the test.

. . .

The damage inflicted by the floodwaters had not been confined to animals and man-made objects. Flowers, shrubs, and trees had perished by the thousands, and the whole town had to be replanted. The most extensive damage had been to the Caskey grounds. All the trees had been uprooted. There were no more crape myrtles or roses, no more beds of day lilies, bearded irises, and King Alfreds, no more hedges of oleander and ligustrum, no more specimens of hawthorn or Japanese magnolia. The azaleas remained in their beds around the house, but they were dead. The camellias looked dead, but Bray said they had survived and Mary-Love accepted his opinion—at any rate, she did not demand that they be dug up.

And certainly there was no more grass. The river had deposited over the ground half a foot or more of sopping red mud. Every day, Mary-Love and Sister watched for blades of grass to sprout through the red soil, but every day they watched in vain.

The DeBordenave and Turk yards, which had suffered equally, had been dug up and reseeded, and the mud from the Perdido seemed to have brought with it a great number of nutrients, for their lawns sprang up sudden, green, and splendid, growing more lushly and certainly faster than ever before. But next door at James Caskey's, the yard was a flat expanse of dark mud. And at Mary-Love's place it was the same. After a few weeks the sun dried out that dark river soil and left a layer of gray sand two inches deep, with the reddish river soil packed beneath that. Sister picked up a fistful of this sand and let it drift through her fingers. Mixed in with the sand were the desiccated grass seeds that Bray broadcast every Friday afternoon. The destruction of the Caskey lawns was a subject for comment in Perdido, for the little plague of sterility was confined only to the Caskey lots. The DeBordenaves were not affected at all, the sand stopping in a straight line at the end of the Caskey property and the grass beginning immediately on the other side. The sand continued to the edge of Mary-Love's deeded property, at the town limit, where the pine forest began with its dense and prickly underbrush. By the end of June, Mary-Love and James had given up hope of ever growing grass again, and Mary-Love hired little Buster Sapp to come every morning at six-thirty and rake patterns in the sand with a leaf broom. By the end of the day most of Buster's careful work had been obliterated by footsteps of servants and visitors and the inhabitants of the houses, but Buster was always there first thing the following morning to renew the artificial symmetry and texture he gave to the injured Caskey demesne. The expanse of sand—somewhat more than two acres in all—was a depressing sight when one remembered the fine gardens and lawn that had surrounded the houses. Only Buster's rigorous patterning made it bearable. So despite talk, Buster worked even on Sundays (for which he was paid double). The households quickly grew accustomed to waking to the sound of rake on sand. Buster was a small, sleepy, infinitely patient child—who moved slowly about, producing an impromptu map of concentric circles and elongated spirals. He plied his rake with a rhythm as inexorable as that of a pendulum. And perhaps it was that indication of time passing that made the sound of the rake on the sand so suggestive of death.

Each morning at six o'clock, before he began his work, Buster's sister fixed his breakfast in Mary-Love's kitchen. Buster was finished by ten, and at that time James Caskey's cook Roxie Welles made him a second breakfast. Then he took a pillow and went down to the mooring dock and took a nap until it was time for the midday meal. In the afternoon he ran errands for the two households. Sometimes he was paid by Mary-Love and sometimes by Miss Elinor—and sometimes he was inadvertently given money by both.

For several months Buster Sapp was practically the only line of communication between the two households, which formerly had been greatly intimate. Mary-Love Caskey didn't approve of Elinor Dammert's living with her brother-in-law and she didn't allow her daughter to approve of it either. James Caskey knew how his sister-in-law felt, but he was too pleased with Elinor's being in the house with him to argue with Mary-Love about the matter. After all, if he got into an argument with Mary-Love, Mary-Love would probably win it, and if Mary-Love won it, Elinor would have to go—and that was exactly what James Caskey did not want.

Elinor took care of him in the way that Genevieve might have if Genevieve had been a real wife. Elinor had supervised the cleaning and repair of the house. Each day in his absence she ordered about Roxie and Roxie's girl, Reta, and Roxie's boy, Escue. Reta spent all day on her knees, scrubbing the floors. Escue painted everything that could be attacked with a brush. Elinor and Roxie sat on the front porch and sewed new curtains for every room in the house. James gave Elinor three hundred dollars and told her to go out and buy what she needed; one day Elinor and Escue drove a wagon ten miles over to Atmore and came back with a load of new linens. Everything that had been touched by the floodwater she threw out. Sooner than any other house in town, James Caskey's—which had been the worst damaged—was in the best repair.

Through means James never discovered, Elinor was able to save many of the fine pieces of furniture that had been thought lost to the floodwater. "I don't know what she did, Oscar," James said one morning at the mill, "but I got home last evening and there was Mama's sofa—the one I was all ready to throw out the back door—bright as bright could be. The rosewood was all polished and every last carved medallion back on it—and I *know* two of 'em broke off and floated out the front door—and a kind of blue upholstery exactly like I remember from when I was just *little*. I'd forgot all

about it till I walked in and saw it! I could have sat down and cried it made me think so much of Mama!"

"James," said Oscar, "are you working Miss Elinor too hard, you think?"

"*I* think I am," replied James modestly, "but she doesn't. That house is in as good a shape as when Mama was living in it and Daddy was dead and couldn't mess it up. That's what that house looks like now! And Grace! Have you seen Grace of late?"

"I have," said Oscar, and they paused to speak to a man who was about to go out of the lumberyard in a wagon.

"But have you seen Grace's dresses?" James went on when the wagon was rolling out the front gate. "Miss Elinor doesn't think a thing in the world of sitting in the kitchen with Roxie and running up an outfit for Grace, while Grace is sitting under the table watching her do it! And with all this, Mary-Love is asking me to charge Miss Elinor room rent!"

"Mama doesn't know Miss Elinor, that's all," said Oscar.

"Mary-Love doesn't *want* to know her, that's what it is! Oscar, you know how I love your mama, and you know your mama has always been right about everything, but I'll tell you something, she is wrong about Miss Elinor. Grace loves her, and I think the world of her! Do you know," said James in a low voice, tapping a bony finger in the air, "that she has polished all my silver and wrapped it up in yellow felt?"

. . .

Oscar Caskey was frustrated. The thing he wanted most in the world was the thing he could not have—and that was the opportunity to learn more about Miss Elinor Dammert. The exigencies of his work at the mill required that he be either in the office or off somewhere in the forest by seven o'clock every morning. He returned home at noontime, but could spare only half an hour to eat, and had to drink his second glass of iced tea on the way back to work. In the evening he might not get home until six or seven o'clock, and by then he was so weary it was all he could do to sit up straight at the supper table. And sometimes in the evening his presence was required at a meeting, the purpose of which was to plan the restoration and improvement of Perdido after the disaster of the Easter flood. He could scarcely do more than wave at Miss Elinor on the front porch of his uncle's house as he rode past in his automobile, or call out, "How you, Miss Elinor?" as he trudged up the steps of his own home, to where his mother

held open the door for him and shut it and hooked it as soon as he got inside.

Mary-Love Caskey didn't pretend to be able to control her son's actions and emotions the way she could Sister's. Mary-Love knew that Oscar liked that red-haired schoolteacher next door, and she also knew that it wasn't her place to tell him that he ought *not* to like her. Oscar was now the man in the family, and that must stand for *something.* So Mary-Love was glad that despite the proximity of Oscar and Elinor there had been so little commerce between them. The flood had brought them together, but the aftermath of the flood was—at least for the time being—keeping them apart.

Early one Saturday morning, however—Saturday morning, the twenty-first of June, 1919, to be exact, when the sun had just crossed over from the air sign of Gemini into the water sign of Cancer—Oscar Caskey rose at his usual hour of five, then remembered that it was Saturday and he wouldn't have to be at the lumberyard until eight o'clock. He would have turned over and tried to sleep another hour then, but he was disturbed by a slight noise outside his window in the still morning. He got up and looked out. The dawn hadn't yet taken hold of the day. The sand below was a wide dark sea, showing only here and there what remained of Buster's work from the previous day. And now marring even more of the patterns was Elinor Dammert, coming up from the mooring dock. She held something tightly in one hand.

Oscar was curious. He wanted to know what had brought her out so early in the morning. He wanted to know what was hidden in her closed fist. He wanted the opportunity to speak to her without his mother or James or tiny Grace or any of the servants around. Hurriedly slipping into his pants and boots he clambered down the back stairs, then stood on the back porch and watched Elinor through the screen. Standing in the middle of the expanse of gray sand that sloped all the way down to the river, she was toeing a small hole in the earth.

The sky was pink and canary yellow in the east, but still dark blue—a blue more radiant than that morning's dawn—in the west. Birds called from across the river, but on this side only a single mockingbird, perched on James Caskey's kitchen roof, could be heard. From even so far away, Oscar could hear the water lapping against the pilings of the mooring dock. He pushed open the screen door.

Miss Elinor looked up. She dropped something out of her hand; it fell into the small hole at her feet. With the toe of her shoe, she covered the hole with sand.

"What are you doing, may I ask?" Oscar said, stepping outside and descending the steps. His voice sounded oddly hollow, breaking that early morning silence. It was so still that the soft shutting of the screen door behind him produced an echo against the side of James Caskey's house.

Miss Elinor moved several feet to her right and toed out another small hole. Oscar came nearer.

"I've got acorns," she said.

"You planting them?" Oscar asked incredulously. "Nobody *plants* acorns. Where'd you get 'em?"

"River washed 'em down," Elinor replied with a smile. "Mr. Oscar, you want to help me?"

"Acorns aren't gone do anything here, Miss Elinor. Look at this yard. What do you see here? Do you see sand, sand, and no grass? That's what I see. I think you are wasting your time planting acorns. Buster is gone come by in a while and rake 'em all up anyway."

"Buster doesn't rake deep," said Elinor. "I've told him I was going to plant trees out here. Mr. Oscar, if the grass won't grow, then we've got to have shade at least. So I'm planting acorns."

"I suppose those are live oak," said Oscar, examining the four acorns that Elinor dropped into his hand. They were wet, as if indeed she had just scooped them out of the water. She hadn't said, though, what she was doing down at the mooring dock at five o'clock in the morning; after all, she couldn't have been *waiting* for the acorns to wash down the Perdido and into her hand, could she?

"They are not," she said. "They are water oak."

"How can you tell?"

"I know what water oak acorns look like. I know what they look like when they wash down the river."

"And you think they'll grow here?"

She nodded.

"I don't know of any stand of water oak up the Perdido," said Oscar after a pause, as if he were trying to recall one. This was a polite way of contradicting Miss Elinor, for in truth Oscar Caskey knew every tree in

Baldwin, Escambia, and Monroe counties, and was perfectly certain that there were no water oak branches overhanging the upper Perdido.

"Must be there, though," said Elinor as she dropped another acorn into the earth, "if they were washing downstream."

"I tell you what," said Oscar as he dug a hole with the heel of his boot and dropped in an acorn. "This afternoon I'll get off work early and you and I will go out in the wagon." He covered up the acorn.

"Go out where?" She reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out another handful of acorns. She dropped several into Oscar's outstretched palm and held the rest of them herself. As he spoke she continued the planting.

"Out in the woods. You're gone pick out the trees you like—anything up to twenty-five feet—and I'll mark 'em with a blue ribbon, and Monday morning I'll send out some men to dig 'em up and we'll bring 'em back here and put 'em in. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. What do I hire men for, anyway? Even if these acorns were to grow—and there's prettier trees than water oaks, Miss Elinor—it would take 'em so long that you and I would be bent over before they provided enough shade to take off our hats."

"You're wrong, Mr. Oscar," said Elinor Dammert, "and I'm not going to pick out any trees in the woods. But you come back here at three o'clock and I will have Escue's wagon ready. We will go for that ride."

. . .

Mary-Love didn't like it a bit, and that evening after his return, Oscar hardly had time to wash his hands before supper was put on the table.

"What did you talk about?" Sister asked.

"About James and Grace and school. We talked about the flood. Just like everybody else in town."

"Why were you so long?" asked Mary-Love. She thought that Oscar's scandalous behavior shouldn't be talked of at all, but her curiosity overcame her misgivings about sanctioning the episode with her questions.

"I took her out to the Sapps and we bought some cane juice. You know they got a three-year-old girl running that press now? She is so small that they have to lay her on her stomach on that old mule's back and tie her on with a rope."

"Those Sapps!" cried Sister. "I declare we are gone end up hiring every one of those nine children just to keep 'em from getting worked to

their deaths."

"So," said Mary-Love, "you went out to the Sapps and you came right back. That took you three hours and thirty-five minutes?"

"We stopped in and spoke to Miz Driver, that's all, and Miz Driver gave us some of her early watermelon. We wouldn't have stopped I think except that Oland and Poland—or it might have been Roland—ran out and stopped the wagon. Those boys think the world of Miss Elinor. You know that those three boys eat watermelon with pepper instead of salt? I had never even heard of that, but Miss Elinor had. Mama, Miss Elinor is smarter than you give her credit for."

And next door, at the table, Miss Elinor told the same story for Grace and James Caskey.

"But you had a good time," said James Caskey.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Elinor, "Mr. Oscar was very good to me."

"Well, as long as you had a good time," said James Caskey, "that's all that matters."

. . .

Eight days after the planting of the water oak acorns, Elinor Dammert attended morning service in Perdido for the first time. Previously, after Sunday school, Elinor had returned home with Grace, who was thought too little to sit through a sermon. But suddenly Grace had gotten older or was better-behaved—or perhaps Elinor Dammert had a particular wish for wanting to go to church. At any rate, next to Elinor sat Oscar Caskey, and when they rose to sing hymns, he held the book open for her as she lifted little Grace in her arms.

Mary-Love didn't like it, but between stanzas Sister whispered, "Mama, you cain't expect her to hold Grace and the hymnbook too!"

When they all returned from church that morning, Buster Sapp was waiting on the front steps of James Caskey's house. He ran up to Miss Elinor, grabbed her hand, and dragged her around to the back.

When the others followed, wondering at Buster's even being awake at that hour of the morning and even more at his failure to finish his raking on one side of the house, they saw Miss Elinor standing near the back parlor windows. She was smiling broadly. Right beside her, wide-eyed and still astonished, Buster Sapp rocked back and forth on his haunches. With a quivering finger he pointed at a little foot-high oak sapling. The acorn from which it had sprung lay split and rotted and loosely covered with coarse

gray sand. And as James Caskey and Mary-Love and Sister and Oscar looked on with astonishment equal to Buster's, the black child rose and rushed all over the yard, and pointed out seventeen more water oak saplings that had raised themselves overnight in the sterile sandy earth.

Chapter 4

The Junction

What was known for certain about Elinor Dammert's life in Perdido could be easily summed up: she had been plucked from the Osceola Hotel on Easter morning by Oscar Caskey and Bray Sugarwhite; she lived with James Caskey and took splendid care of his small daughter Grace; she was to teach fourth grade in the fall; and she was being courted by Oscar Caskey whose mother didn't like it one little bit.

But everything else was a mystery, and seemed likely to remain so. Elinor Dammert was not unfriendly—she always spoke on the street, had a memory for names, and was polite in all the stores—but she didn't go out of her way to join in the life of the community. In other words, she didn't gossip—about herself or about others. Nor did she do much that was out of the ordinary—except to live apparently without care that Genevieve Caskey was bound to return someday and raise holy hell that her place in James's household had been usurped; and to have raised enmity in Mary-Love Caskey, a kind if slightly domineering woman, who had never before been known to dislike anyone who wasn't a thief or a drunk.

Actually, it was thought that Miss Elinor didn't really take to life in Perdido. The common remark was that she looked peaked, almost as if she weren't used to the climate, though how that might be when she was from Fayette County, not all *that* far north, no one knew. Certainly during these summer months, Miss Elinor spent a great deal of time in the water, and the muscularity of her shoulders—a strange thing in an Alabama woman—was a frequently remarked upon fact. People also said that she looked as if she weren't getting enough to eat (or perhaps not enough of the right things), though since James kept an ample table and Roxie was one of the best cooks in town, people didn't see how this explanation of Elinor's condition could apply.

. . .

Buster Sapp arrived at the Caskeys' one morning early, even before the sun was up. He had set out from his parents' home in the country and miscalculated the time needed for the journey into town. As he went around the back of the house, intending to nap for a bit on the back steps, he was

startled to see someone standing on the mooring dock. It was Elinor Dammert, and her white shift gleamed in the light of the setting moon. She dived into the river. Buster ran down to the water's edge and watched her as she swam in easy strong strokes directly across to the other bank. The swift current didn't deflect her an inch. This astounded Buster, who knew with what difficulty strong-armed Bray paddled from one bank to the other.

Before she had quite reached the other side, Elinor turned, and raised her head above the water. "I see you, Buster Sapp!" she cried out. The swift water flowed strongly past her, but Miss Elinor seemed immovably anchored.

"I'm here, Miss El'nor!" Buster called back. He was already quite in awe of the woman, because of the water oaks she had planted. Buster, raking around their slender trunks each morning, noticed daily growth. Was that natural? His sister Ivey told him it was because the acorns had been planted at the dark of the moon, but even that seemed an insufficient explanation.

"You come in here with me and we'll swim down to the junction!"

"Current is too strong, Miss El'nor! And I don't know what's in that water at night! They was oncet a alligator up in the Blackwater Swamp—Ivey told me. She told me that alligator ate up three little baby girls and spit up their bones on a sandbar!"

Grinning, Miss Elinor rose up straight in the early morning air until Buster could see her white bare feet shining beneath the surface of the black water. Then, in a graceful easy motion and without bending she toppled sideways into the current and began to slip gracefully downstream.

Buster knew what the whirlpool was like at the confluence of the Perdido and the Blackwater no more than a quarter of a mile away. He feared that Miss Elinor would drown. Help couldn't come in time even if he called, however, so the black boy ran along the bank of the river, stumbling occasionally on the exposed roots of trees, following Miss Elinor's white shift glowing just below the surface of the water. As he scrambled through a little screening thicket of pin oaks and magnolias, his trouser leg caught on a thorn and he had to sit down and carefully free himself. Rushing on, he soon found himself in the empty field in back of the courthouse. Here before him was the junction, where the red water of the Perdido and the black water of the Blackwater met, fought, and then were both sucked into the swiftly revolving maelstrom at the center.

Behind him the town hall clock began to toll five o'clock. He turned and stared a moment at its green-illuminated face. Miss Elinor ought to have got this far by now—she had been swimming fast, and Buster had been waylaid in the pin oak thicket. But he didn't see her anywhere. Had she already been dragged down? Buster trembled. Then suddenly he saw her head bob above the surface of the water a dozen yards upstream. The water flowed swiftly around her motionless body as if she had snagged there, but the Perdido was deep and without snags in that place. Then, almost as if she had simply waited for Buster to find her, Miss Elinor resumed her downstream journey. Buster watched with perfect terror as she moved on and then was caught up in the circular motion of the junction proper. Absolutely still and straight, and a few inches below the surface, she went round and round in the whirlpool. Buster called out wildly: "Miss El'nor! Miss El'nor! You gone drown!"

The woman was being drawn in closer and closer to the center of the spinning vortex. She stretched out her arms before her, and her body began to blend itself into the curve of the maelstrom. Soon, Buster saw, her body had formed itself into a complete circle. She had taken hold of her own toes, and she formed a white frame around the black whirling hole of the downspout.

Suddenly the circle of white skin and cotton that was Elinor Dammert sank out of Buster's sight.

He was overwhelmed with the certainty that this woman he so respected was doomed. Ivey told him that something lived right at the bottom of that whirlpool, something which during the day buried itself in the sand, but at night dug itself out again and sat on the muddy riverbed and waited for animals to get pulled down the whirlpool. But what it liked best was people. If you ever got pulled down there, it grabbed you so tight that your arms got broken and you couldn't fight back. Then it licked the eyeballs right out of your head with its black tongue. Then it ate your whole head, and then it buried the rest of your body in the muck so that nobody would ever find out what became of you. It looked mostly like a frog, but it had the tail of an alligator, and that tail swept the riverbed constantly, keeping all the bodies buried so that none of them ever floated up to the surface. It had one red gill for Perdido water and one black one for the Blackwater. If it got *real* hungry it came up on the land—once Ivey had seen its trail from the riverbank to the house in Baptist Bottom where a

washerwoman's two-year-old boy had disappeared the night before, and nobody ever found out what became of that child. Whatever it was, whatever waited on the murky riverbed for unlucky swimmers, whatever crawled up the clayey banks on dark nights; whatever that thing was, Ivey had assured her brother, it had been there before Perdido was built, and would be there when Perdido was no more.

Buster was now standing on a small piece of clay riverbank that jutted into the river. What Buster couldn't see was that it had been undermined by the action of the current. Suddenly it gave way. Flailing and screeching, Buster Sapp was thrown into the water. He tried to scramble up the bank again, and could feel the hard clay beneath his feet, giving him hope of recovery, but suddenly the circular motion of the junction seemed to enlarge itself to the very banks of the rivers. Inexorably, Buster was pulled away from the achingly close safety of that bank and into the whirlpool. He tried frantically to swim downstream, but he remained in the turning current.

As he was pulled beneath the surface of the water, he opened his eyes for a moment and saw distorted the green clock face on the town hall. He screamed, and muddy water filled his mouth.

A large pine branch was also caught up in the maelstrom, and he grasped it as a spar to keep him afloat; but the branch was no more anchored than he, and they simply spun along together. He managed to get his head above the surface for a moment and catch two breaths of air, then was sucked below again. He was closer now to the downspout, spinning around ever more quickly.

He let go of the pine branch suddenly, and leaped out of the water—or at least he performed the motion of leaping, for he succeeded only in initiating a tumbling motion below the surface of the water. He was not only going around and around, he was being tossed head over heels in a dizzying succession of somersaults—and being inexorably drawn nearer the center.

The current was so swift at that center, the whirlpool so pronounced, that there was a depression in the surface of the water more than a foot deep. Quite suddenly, Buster was there, at the top of the downspout that was the entrance to the watery hell below. He managed to get two gulps of air, and to open his eyes. The surface of the river was at a level above his eyes. He tried to scream, but at the moment that he drew in one last breath, he was sucked straight down toward the bottom.

The thing Ivey had warned him against grabbed him. Buster's arms were pinned to his sides with such force that the bones splintered inside them. His breath was squeezed out until none was left, and he braced for the coarse black tongue that would lick out his eyeballs. Unable to refrain, he opened his eyes, but so far beneath the surface he could see nothing at all. Then he felt a thick heavy coarseness press over his nose and mouth. As it licked up toward his eyes, Buster Sapp slipped into a blackness that was deeper and darker and more merciful than the cold Perdido.

. . .

No trace of Buster was ever discovered, but no one expected it to be otherwise. Elinor Dammert, unable to sleep and up early, said she had seen Buster dive off the mooring peer into the Perdido. Unquestionably he had been swept down to the junction and drowned. So many persons had been drowned at the junction and their bodies never located, either in town or much farther down the river, that no one even thought of attempting to assure the bereaved Sapps that the corpse of their little boy might be recovered. "He had no business getting in that water by the light of the moon," said his mother, Creola, and she took comfort in the eight children who remained to her.

After Buster's disappearance, Mary-Love set Bray to poor Buster's monotonous task. Bray so little liked it, thinking the job beneath his dignity, that he drove his common-law wife, Ivey, out to the Sapp cane field one day and requisitioned one of Ivey's sisters, a ten-year-old called Zaddie. Zaddie took up residence in Baptist Bottom with her sister and brother-in-law and was presented with her unfortunate brother's rake.

And however it was, whether her system became suddenly accustomed to the local climate, or whether Roxie Welles began to feed her better, Miss Elinor no longer looked peaked. Her face regained the healthy color it had had when she was rescued from the flooded hotel. Miss Elinor looked as if she were settling in.

. . .

The school year began on September 2. On that day Miss Elinor assumed charge of the fourth grade, and tiny Grace entered the first. And when that morning, after a large celebratory breakfast, James Caskey asked Miss Elinor if she and Grace didn't want a ride to the school in his automobile, she thanked him but declined.

"You know how to get there, don't you, walking?"

“Of course, I know,” Elinor replied, “but Grace and I won’t be walking.”

“Well,” said James Caskey, smiling at Roxie who was bringing in a plate of hot biscuits, “how do you intend to get there? Is Escue gone take you down there in the back of his wagon?”

“Grace and I are going in the boat,” announced Miss Elinor, and she looked at Grace, who grinned and nodded her head in excitement.

“A boat!” cried James Caskey.

“Bray’s boat,” said Miss Elinor. “I have his permission.”

James Caskey sat still and perplexed. “Miss Elinor,” he said at last, “you know you got to get past the junction in order to get from our mooring dock down to the school. How do you intend to do it?”

“I intend to paddle hard,” replied Miss Elinor imperturbably.

“Let me remind you,” said James in a tone that seemed only mildly protesting considering the danger he perceived threatening his only child, “that poor little Buster Sapp drowned at the junction last summer.”

Miss Elinor laughed. “You are afraid for Grace, Mr. Caskey.”

“I’m not afraid, Daddy!”

“I know you’re not, darling, and of course I trust Miss Elinor, it’s just that the junction...well, you remember Buster, don’t you, child?”

“Course I remember Buster,” cried Grace, putting her hands petulantly on her hips. Then she looked sideways both at her father and at Miss Elinor, and added in a low voice, “Ivey says Buster got *eaten up!”*

“Ivey was trying to scare you, honey,” said James. “But what happened to Buster was that he drowned.”

“Mr. Caskey,” said Elinor, “my daddy ran a ferry across the Tombigbee River for thirty-two years. I used to paddle up that river every noon to bring him his dinner. And that was when I wasn’t any bigger than Grace.” She smiled. “If you’re worried, I’ll tie a rope under Grace’s arms, and make Zaddie run along the bank, holding on.”

But James Caskey wouldn’t allow Miss Elinor to take Grace with her. That morning Elinor Dammert paddled the boat alone. James and Grace, however, were standing below the junction in the field behind the town hall when Elinor came by, and they waved lustily and called. She waved back at them and shot past the junction with only a little quiver of her paddle in the water. She rowed over to the red clay bank and sank the paddle into the soft

earth. James Caskey went over and lifted Grace into the boat. “You were right,” he said, “and I was wrong.”

“Let’s go!” cried Miss Elinor, and pushed off. Grace squealed in delight and waved frantically to her father.

. . .

Next day a dozen early morning loafers had congregated in the field back of the town hall waiting for Miss Elinor and Grace to shoot past the junction in Bray Sugarwhite’s little green boat. On Thursday, two dozen men and women were hanging out of the town hall windows, and everybody waved. Elinor Dammert was a crazy fool to do it and James Caskey was a crazy fool to allow his daughter to ride in that boat, because one day a whirlpool was going to swallow them both up and spit up splinters and bones onto the red clay bank. Yet in a week or two it didn’t seem such a crazy sight; they still waved from the town hall windows, but no one predicted destruction for Miss Elinor and Grace anymore.

. . .

Zaddie Sapp was a quick child, quicker than Buster had ever been, and when she had finished raking the yards each morning she would sit in the kitchen with Roxie or with her sister Ivey and take up a morsel of sewing or a pan of unshelled peas. It didn’t matter what it was, she just wanted to be doing something. Elinor took a liking to the child and showed her how to manage simple embroidery. Mary-Love roundly condemned this when she heard of it, for colored women, in Perdido’s opinion, had no use for ornamental work. But Elinor gave Zaddie a basket of pillowcases, and Zaddie painstakingly embroidered a floral border around each and every one of them. For this effort, Elinor rewarded her fifty cents apiece.

By this and many other such actions, Elinor won Zaddie Sapp’s heart. Every afternoon at three o’clock, Zaddie sat on the mooring pier and waited for Miss Elinor and Grace to come paddling up.

“How are you?” Elinor asked Zaddie every day, and every day Zaddie was thrilled by the question.

“I’m just fine,” Zaddie replied invariably, and then told her everything that had happened in both Caskey households that day.

In these fine September and October afternoons, Elinor would sit on the front porch of James Caskey’s house, rocking in a chair and listening while Zaddie and Grace sat on the steps and read aloud out of a book. Though she was four years younger than Zaddie, Grace was much the better

scholar and apt to be proud of her scholastic superiority, but Elinor always kept Grace in check. “Grace,” Elinor would say, “if Zaddie had had your opportunities, she would be much farther along than you are now. How well do you think you would be able to read if you had spent three years of your life on the back of a mule going round and round a cane-grind?” Abashed, Grace would button her lip and hand the book sheepishly to Zaddie, who quivered with the sense of privilege at being defended by so august a being as Miss Elinor. Miss Elinor, Zaddie never tired of repeating, was the only person in Perdido—man or woman—who could paddle a boat right past the junction.

Chapter 5

Courtship

By September, the three sawmills of Perdido were back in operation, and the exigencies laid upon James and Oscar Caskey lessened. When Oscar saw that Miss Elinor sat on the front porch every afternoon from three-thirty until dark, he took to coming home earlier from the mill.

He would park his automobile on the street, get out, and start up the walk toward his own house, then turn aside after ten steps or so as if with sudden inspiration. He would walk across the yard towards James's house, obliterating some of Zaddie's careful work and speak first to the black girl, who with Grace beside her, was always to be found at Elinor's feet. "So, Zaddie, how much did the water oaks grow today?"

"Grew some, Mr. Oscar," she invariably replied.

Everyone in Perdido had heard of the unrelenting vigor of Elinor's trees, had passed by the houses to see them, and had talked of them to an extent that rendered them old news indeed. No one had any explanation for the extraordinarily rapid growth, and all that remained was for Zaddie every day to ascertain that the grove of trees had gained another inch or so in the night.

After a little exchange with Zaddie on the progress of the trees, Oscar would turn to his cousin Grace, and remark something like, "I heard at the barbershop this morning that you and your little friends tied up your teacher and threw her off the top of the school auditorium. Was this true?"

"No!" Grace would cry indignantly.

"How you, Miss Elinor?" Oscar asked then, turning to her as if he had come across the yard expressly to speak to Zaddie and Grace, and now that he had done so, was free to see who else was about. "How were your Indians today?"

Oscar referred to all the students of the grammar school as "Indians."

"My Indians kept me hopping," said Elinor with a smile. "It's my boys, though. My girls would do anything for me. Take a seat, Mr. Oscar. You look tired on your feet."

"I am, I am," said Oscar, taking the rocking chair next to hers, quite as if she hadn't made the same invitation, and he accepted it, every day for the

past two weeks.

"Your mama," said Elinor, "is peering at us through the camellia bushes."

Oscar stood out of his chair and called out, "Hey, Mama!"

Mary-Love, discovered, stepped from behind the cover of camellias.

"Oscar, I thought that was you!" she called from the porch.

"Didn't you see the car, Mama?" he called out. He looked down at Miss Elinor. "She saw the car," he said, in a voice his mother couldn't hear.

"Tell her to come over here and sit with us," said Elinor.

"Mama! Miss Elinor says come over here and sit awhile!"

"Tell Miss Elinor thank you, but I've got peas to shell!"

"She doesn't!" cried Zaddie indignantly to Grace. "I shelled ever' one of them peas this morning!"

"Tell your mama," said Elinor politely, though she had certainly heard Zaddie's contention that Mary-Love's excuse was empty, "that if she'll come over here, Zaddie and I will help her with her shelling."

"All right, Mama!" cried out Oscar, not bothering to perpetuate the deception by straining his voice. He sat down again. He smiled at Elinor. "Mama does not want me over here," he remarked.

"Why not?" demanded Grace, as she watched Mary-Love disappear behind the camellias again.

"Because of me," said Elinor.

"Because of *you?"* cried Grace, not even beginning to comprehend how anyone could object to Miss Elinor.

"Miss Mary-Love thinks Mr. Oscar should be sitting on her front porch talking to her, and not sitting on *this* front porch talking to you and me and Zaddie."

"Then why doesn't she come over here? We invited her."

Oscar sighed. "Let it be, Grace."

"Mr. Oscar," said Zaddie, turning around, "I shelled them peas this morning."

"I know it, Zaddie. Now you and Grace sit still for a while."

Grace and Zaddie leaned their heads together and began whispering.

"Your boys are giving you trouble?" Oscar asked.

"They'll settle down next month. Right now half of them are out with the cotton harvest and the other half wish they were. I can't get them to

wear shoes, and I have to check them for ringworm every morning before recess."

"They listen to you, don't they?"

"I make them listen," laughed Elinor. "I tell them that if they don't listen to me, I'm going to take them out in Bray's boat and drop them off at the junction. That makes them sit up straight. But I don't have any trouble with my girls."

Miss Elinor had thirty-four students, eighteen boys and sixteen girls. Twenty lived in town and fourteen in the surrounding countryside. Of the fourteen from the country, twelve had been kept home for the past few weeks to help with the harvest. The remaining two were silent little Indian girls whose mother and father operated five stills in the piney woods over on Little Turtle Creek; they rode into school every day on the back of a decrepit mule. Elinor taught her children arithmetic, geography, spelling, grammar, and Confederate history.

Every morning Roxie fixed Miss Elinor a lunch to take to school, but one morning Roxie was called away to help with a baby-birthing in Baptist Bottom, and nothing could be prepared. When Roxie did return, a little before noon, she packed the little wicker case and gave it to Zaddie to deliver to the teacher. To go to the school of the white children was a great adventure for Zaddie, and she approached the building with awe. The principal, Ruth Digman, showed her the way to Elinor's classroom and knocked on the door for her.

The child at the back of the room, whose duty it was to open the door when anyone knocked, rose and answered the summons; all the children turned around and stared at the black girl in the doorway. No one had ever seen a colored child in the white school. Trembling, Zaddie went forward with Miss Elinor's lunch. The teacher thanked her, then introduced her to the class. "Boys and girls," said Miss Elinor, "this is Zaddie Sapp, who is exactly your age. If she went to school she'd be in the fourth grade too, and she'd be as smart as the smartest one of you sitting here. She is saving up her money to pay the tuition at the Colored Arts and Mechanics College up in Brewton, and I will give her a quarter this very minute to put in her bank."

Zaddie took the quarter and rushed headlong from the room. From that moment—if, indeed, she had not already signed herself over—she was Elinor Dammert's creature for life.

. . .

One day in October, home from the mill for lunch, Oscar learned quite accidentally from Ivey Sapp that his mother and his sister would be going to Pensacola on an overnight visit in order to get to a particular dressmaker early in the morning. Oscar quickly figured out that Mary-Love hadn't mentioned her upcoming absence to him because she hadn't wanted him to take advantage of it by spending the time in the company of Elinor Dammert. Oscar stepped out on the back porch and called Zaddie over to him. The girl, who was sitting under one of the water oaks that had kept on growing even though it was fall, came directly over.

"Zaddie, you know where Miss Elinor teaches, don't you?"

"I been there," said Zaddie.

"Will you take her a note for me? I'll give you a quarter to do it, Zaddie."

"I'll take it, Mr. Oscar," said the black girl eagerly. She would gladly have done it only for the chance to see the classroomful of white children again. Zaddie knew secretly that she could read better than half of them.

Oscar went back inside and wrote out a note at the kitchen table. He folded the note, took it out to Zaddie, and then after saying goodbye to his mother and sister he returned to the mill.

Late that afternoon, Mary-Love and Sister took off for Pensacola in the Torpedo roadster driven by Bray. Bray had been taught to drive the family's two automobiles, and more and more his position in the Caskey household was that of chauffeur. Mary-Love left her son a note suggesting that the trip had been made on the spur of the moment and telling him that supper had been left covered up for him on the kitchen table. Oscar ignored the note and the supper. He ate next door, and then took Miss Elinor and Grace to see *The Ghost of Rosie Taylor* at the Ritz Theater. After the flood the Ritz had reopened with scarlet upholstery and a new rosewood piano.

Later, when Grace had been put to bed, Miss Elinor and Oscar took a little walk down to the river. They sat on the mooring dock looking at the moon and stayed there until the town hall clock tolled midnight. Oscar declared that he hadn't been up that late since he tried to save the Caskey houses from the rising floodwater.

After that, Zaddie had a new job—she was a messenger. Every day she delivered to Miss Elinor the note that Mr. Oscar had written on the kitchen table directly after his noontime meal. Miss Elinor would read the note and

write another in reply. Zaddie would take this note to the mill and walk straight into Mr. Oscar's office. Everybody in the school and everybody in the mill knew what Zaddie was doing, who had written the notes, and to whom they were directed.

Zaddie began to get to know Miss Elinor's students by name, and once, when she got there just at recess, she had even jumped rope and was able to teach the little white girls a rhyme they had never heard before.

Elinor Trimble Toe, she's a good fisherman
She catches fish and puts them in a pan
Some fry up and some fry down
Wire and bar and limber lock
Clock fell down and mouse ran round
To my dying grandma's house
With the old dirty dishrag in her mouth

Zaddie was proud of her daily errands, and didn't care a bit if Miss Mary-Love wouldn't speak to her anymore because of her services in the courtship of Miss Elinor and Mr. Oscar.

Because their big meal of the day was at noon and supper consisted of leftovers, Mary-Love found it difficult to complain when Oscar said he was going over to eat at James's where the food was hot. "You are bothering James," Mary-Love ventured to object, when she could refrain from objection no longer. "You are running up his food bill."

Oscar shrugged and replied only, "Mama, James eats dinner with us over here every day and you don't charge him a penny. He can afford to have me for supper once in a while."

"Every night!"

"He asks you and Sister to come too."

"It would drive poor Roxie into the ground if all of us went over there all the time."

"No, it wouldn't. Roxie doesn't have to cook during the day. And she told me she didn't see why you and Sister ate cold food when you could have hot."

Mary-Love wouldn't reply, for she wouldn't bring herself to admit that she refused to sit at the same table with Elinor Dammert. War, it should be understood, remained officially undeclared. Sister wasn't allowed to go

next door either, and at home she just picked at her cold plate and wished she knew what they were talking about over at James's.

No mother and daughter in Perdido were closer than Mary-Love Caskey and Sister, but it was not to be supposed that either told the other everything she thought or knew. In fact, each of them liked to keep little secrets from the other, secrets which could be sprung at some opportune moment to produce a grand effect—rather in the manner of a little boy tossing lighted firecrackers beneath his sister's bed while she napped on a hot summer afternoon.

What Sister was holding back just now was not exactly a secret so much as it was an opinion, and that opinion had to do with Elinor Dammert. It was Sister's belief that Elinor was a powerful young woman, and that the power she wielded was exactly the sort to which Mary-Love herself had become accustomed. Elinor Dammert put things in place. She set things up. She set things right. She picked up people and she put them down again where she wanted them as a child might arrange the figures in a wooden Noah's ark. Sister even had a mental image of James Caskey as a wooden figure. In her mind he was on a round base and a single stem represented his legs. Grace was a much smaller such figure. Zaddie was painted black and Oscar had the biggest smile. And Elinor Dammert, in Sister's imaginings, threw her arms about the waists of those figures and lifted them up and carried them where she wanted them to be and put them down again. The figures wobbled a little, but they stayed in place.

Mary-Love, by contrast, wheedled. She set up psychological stratagems by which her will was accomplished. Elinor was more powerful of the two, Sister suspected. Mary-Love only sometimes seemed so, because Elinor was holding back. While it was perfectly within Elinor's power to pick Oscar up and put him where she wanted him, she wanted Oscar to come to her of his own accord. But it was well within Elinor's capacity to knock over the wooden figure that was Mary-Love Caskey and roll her in tight circles until Mary-Love grew nauseated. Elinor was toying with Mary-Love, perpetuating Mary-Love's blindness to her own inferiority, perhaps wishing to test whether Oscar were capable of overcoming his mother without assistance. This opinion is what Sister was keeping from her mother, only waiting for the right moment to spring it.

. . .

One evening, a few days before Thanksgiving, Sister had a headache. Mary-Love had been carrying on about Miss Elinor all afternoon long, and that was a subject Sister thought she had heard enough of, especially as she considered that her mother's every pronouncement on that subject was jaundiced and inaccurate. As they sat together at the kitchen table eating leftover pork chops and corn, Mary-Love picked up where she had left off.

"I don't know what we are gone do about Thanksgiving."

"What do you mean, Mama?" said Sister wearily, slicing some fat off the chop.

"Well, we'll have it here, of course, and James and Grace are gone come, but what, I want to know, is James gone do about that woman?" Mary-Love Caskey couldn't be brought to say "Miss Elinor" aloud, but always called her "that woman"; this was sometimes confusing since she had always used that epithet for Genevieve Caskey as well.

Sister didn't answer, but she was so in the habit of responding to every remark her mother made that her very silence said something.

"Well, Sister?"

"Have you talked to James?" asked Sister. "Have you invited him directly?"

"Of course not! Why should I? Where else would they go for Thanksgiving?"

"James expects for you to invite Miss Elinor."

"I won't do it! Did he tell you that?"

"Yes," replied Sister. "He said he expects you to walk across the yard and extend a personal invitation to Miss Elinor to have Thanksgiving dinner over here."

"I won't do it! That woman has not stepped foot one in this house, and I don't intend to open the door for her now!"

"Then James says that he and Grace and Miss Elinor will have Thanksgiving dinner over there, and they'll invite you and if you don't want to come that's your business."

"Sister, why are *you* delivering this ultimatum? Is there another word for it?" she demanded rhetorically. Then, as if perhaps Sister had not taken the question as it was meant, Mary-Love answered it herself. "No," she said firmly, "there is not. It *is* an ultimatum."

"James told me to say that. He told me this afternoon."

“Sister,” cried Mary-Love in an extremity of annoyance, “do you believe this?” She ran to the kitchen window and looked out. The dining room of James’s house was lighted and she could see Miss Elinor through the window serving something onto Grace’s plate.

“Mama,” said Sister, whose headache was worse, “everybody in town thinks you are crazy out of your mind for not taking Miss Elinor to your heart. Everybody in town thinks the world of her.”

“I don’t!”

“Everybody *but* you, Mama.”

“Bray doesn’t!”

“Mama, I’m gone tell you something—”

“What?”

“Mama, I think you better start liking Miss Elinor.”

“Why is that, Sister?”

“Because Oscar is gone end up married to her.”

Mary-Love drew back from the window with a deep breath.

“I would be surprised,” continued Sister unmercifully, “if he has not already asked her.”

. . .

In fact, Oscar was circuitously asking that question at the very moment that Miss Elinor was spooning out English peas onto Grace’s plate. He said, “Miss Elinor, you know what?”

“What?” said Miss Elinor.

“I’ve been thinking about Zaddie.”

“You are running that girl to death!” said James at the head of the table, laughing. With Elinor there every night, and Oscar there most, James felt a little of what he imagined it might feel like to have a real family.

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Oscar.

“Zaddie has got more money than any other little girl in Perdido, white or colored.” Miss Elinor sat up straight, and cut into her ham. “Every time you see her coming, Oscar, you give her a quarter. And I do, too.”

“But her legs are tired,” said Oscar.

“What do you expect Elinor to do about Zaddie’s poor old legs?” asked James.

Zaddie, who had been listening to this conversation from the kitchen, appeared in the doorway and lifted her skirt to show that her legs were not worn down at all.

“Miz Digman will not let me put a telephone in my classroom, Oscar. If you continue to send me notes, then you have to have someone to deliver them.”

“My legs are fine,” began Zaddie, but Roxie grabbed her by the skirt and dragged her back into the kitchen.

“White folks don’t like to look at a little colored girl when they are eating,” said Roxie sententiously, “unless she is bringing in a plate of something hot.” The door of the kitchen was pushed shut and Zaddie, for a time, heard no more.

“But what if we were married?” said Oscar. “Then I wouldn’t have to send you notes.”

Elinor looked up. Then she looked at James Caskey. “Mr. James,” said Elinor, “I think Oscar is making a proposal of marriage.”

“Are you gone accept him?” said James, with every indication of pleasure in his face.

“What do you think, Grace? Should I get married to your cousin Oscar?”

“No!” cried Grace, with distress written all over her countenance.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want you to leave!”

“Well, where would I go?” She looked up at Oscar. “Oscar, if I married you, would you take me away?”

“I’m not ever gone leave Perdido, Miss Elinor!”

“I mean out of this house, Oscar. Where do you propose that we would live?”

“I don’t know,” said Oscar after a moment. “It only just occurred to me this minute—while James was talking about not getting a letter from Genevieve—that I ought to be married myself. And I looked up and there you were, just sitting there not married. I really haven’t had time to consider everything. I have not yet bought a ring, Miss Elinor, so you needn’t ask me to produce one. I couldn’t do it even if you held a knife to my throat and demanded it.”

Grace picked up her knife and waved it in the air as if to tempt Elinor to put it to just such a use. Her father spoke Grace’s thoughts.

“Oscar,” said his uncle, “I don’t hardly think it would be right for you to take Miss Elinor away from Grace and me.”

Oscar turned in his chair and peered out across the yard at the lighted kitchen of his own home. He could see his mother standing in the window, looking out at them.

"I don't think Mama's gone be any too pleased either, when it comes down to it."

"Oscar," said Elinor, "Miss Mary-Love is not pleased when you have *anything* to do with me. She will certainly not be looking forward to your walking me up a church aisle."

"Elinor," cried James Caskey, "haven't you ever been to a wedding? In a wedding, the groom is standing at the front, and the bride and her father come down the aisle. You say your daddy is dead, I guess I'll have to take his place."

"Mr. James, please remember I have not said yes to Oscar!"

"Don't say yes!" cried Grace. "*I* want to marry you!"

"Darling," said Elinor with a smile to the child, "if girls married girls, then I'd marry you. But girls have to marry boys."

Oscar grinned and waved to his mother. Mary-Love disappeared from the window.

"Oscar," said Elinor, "I guess you and I will have to have a wedding, since I'm not allowed to marry Grace. But I want you to know right now, I'd rather have Grace."

Grace lowered her head poutingly onto her fists and wouldn't look higher than the edge of her plate.

. . .

Later that night Oscar told Sister of his engagement and Sister told Mary-Love. Mary-Love shut the door of her room and didn't come out again for three days. She feigned a nebulous indisposition of her bowels. Sister had to make all the preparations for Thanksgiving dinner, and that included inviting James and Grace and Miss Elinor to join them.

. . .

On the holiday morning Mary-Love looked wan and sad, as if she had just heard not only that her favorite cousin had died, but that he hadn't left her any money. She opened the door for James and Grace and Miss Elinor. It was the first time Elinor Dammert had entered the house. "Sister tells me you and Oscar are going to be married," Mary-Love said.

"Oscar didn't tell you?" asked James.

"Sister told me," said Mary-Love.

“Sister was right,” said Elinor, unabashed. “Oscar and I *are* getting married. He was afraid that he was going to wear down Zaddie’s legs sending me so many notes. Married people don’t have to send notes.”

“Zaddie,” said Mary-Love, “*might* have better things to do than traipse around town delivering notes. Zaddie *might* do a little something or other around the house. I *wonder* why we pay her at all. I *wonder* whether Zaddie wouldn’t appear to better advantage on the back of Creola Sapp’s old mule.” When she was distressed, Mary-Love’s speech tended toward the emphatic.

There was no triumph in Miss Elinor’s demeanor at Thanksgiving dinner. Neither did she quail beneath Mary-Love’s baleful eye. She seemed perfectly at her ease, and actually laughed aloud at a joke that James told Sister.

For dessert there were two cakes, one chocolate and one coconut, and three pies: Boston cream, pecan, and mincemeat. Sister and Miss Elinor cut them up and served out slices.

Mary-Love got hers and said, “Sister says no date has been set for the wedding.”

“That’s right,” said James. “Of course, everybody wanted to talk over the plans with you, Mary-Love.”

“Elinor’s family should make all the decisions,” said Mary-Love.

“All my family are dead,” said Elinor. Everyone at the table looked at Elinor in great surprise. No one but James had heard this before, and he had forgotten it. Everyone had supposed that she had many relatives still in and around Wade.

“All of them?” asked Sister.

“I’m the last one.”

“Then, Mama,” said Oscar, “you’re gone have to help us.”

“First thing to do,” said Mary-Love quickly, “is to set the date.”

“All right, Mama,” said Oscar eagerly. During the course of the meal, Mary-Love had addressed several remarks to Miss Elinor, but none to her own son. Once when Oscar asked his mother a question she pretended not to have heard him and didn’t answer.

“One year from today,” said Mary-Love.

Miss Elinor stopped directly behind Mary-Love, holding a plate of pie intended for Grace who was vainly reaching for it. Elinor looked steadily at Oscar but said nothing.

“Mama,” cried Oscar, “that’s a long time away! Elinor and I were thinking more like maybe February. You’re talking—”

“Miss Elinor, you and Oscar don’t have anyplace to live, do you?”

Elinor finally came around with the pie and set it before Grace. “No, ma’am,” she said, “not yet. But I think it will be easy enough to find something.”

“Not something suitable,” said Mary-Love, staring straight in front of her. “Not something that would really do. If you got married in February, you’d have to live here with Sister and me.”

“No!” cried Grace. “Miss Elinor said—”

“Hush, child!” cried Sister in a low voice.

“I’ve invited them to live with me, Mary-Love,” said James.

“James, you have less room than I have. And it’s not right for newlyweds to share. Newlyweds need time to be alone together.”

There was an iciness in Mary-Love’s voice that contradicted the benignity of her words.

“Well, Mama, waiting a year doesn’t solve any of those problems,” said Oscar. “We’d still have to go out looking for a place to live.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” said Mary-Love quickly, looking at her son for the first time since the meal had begun. Oscar blushed and glanced away. Elinor had resumed her place at the table and regarded her future husband in silence.

“I’ve already decided what to give you as a wedding gift.”

“What?” said Oscar, looking up.

“I’m building you a house,” said Mary-Love, “right here next door to us, between this house and the town line.” She went on quickly, before anyone had the opportunity to express surprise in words. “But even if they start tomorrow—and they won’t because I haven’t mentioned this to anybody—it won’t be done before April or May, and then we have to get it furnished. Sister and I will take care of that—Miss Elinor, you won’t have to do a thing.”

Miss Elinor made no reply.

“And when the house is done we can plan the wedding. That’ll take another couple of months. Oscar is my only boy, and I’m going to see that this thing is done right. Oscar?” she said, demanding his approval of the plan without objection.

Oscar turned and looked at Elinor Dammert. She said nothing at all, made no motion of her eyes, did not alter her expression. He received no clue as to what she thought his answer ought to be—and it was his masculine opacity that prevented him from understanding that *no clue* was a very large clue indeed.

"Mama, does it have to be a whole year?" he asked at last.

"Yes," said Mary-Love.

He then nodded acquiescence.

"Miss Elinor?" said Mary-Love.

"Whatever Oscar wants," said Miss Elinor, putting a bite of coconut cake into her mouth.

Chapter 6

Oscar's Retaliation

Winters were mild in Perdido, but there was almost always a cold snap that lasted about a week late in January. Invariably some old colored woman in the country whose ramshackle house had walls made mostly of layers of newspaper would succumb and be found dead by her great-grandchildren who had come to gather her last pecans. The wives and daughters of the millowners would have a few days in which to show off their fur coats. Pipes burst everywhere, and everyone would sit in the kitchen by the stove. But with this single week as an exception, it was possible to sit out on the front porch all year long. And the weather was never so cold that Miss Elinor did not row Bray's little green boat to school. It was a common remark that Miss Elinor didn't feel the cold of that river anymore than did the fish that swam in it.

During that winter of 1920, Elinor's first in Perdido, the pact between Mary-Love and Oscar became known all over town; and it was a bargain that was seen in its true light. In exchange for Oscar's postponing the wedding for a year (during which time Mary-Love doubtless hoped that the engagement would be severed), she would build her son a fine house next door to her own. Supposing she got her wish and Miss Elinor went back to wherever it was that Miss Elinor came from, Mary-Love would retain her unmarried son, and her only problem would be what to do with the house. But perhaps, it was conjectured by those who liked to think about contingencies, she would move into it herself.

What Miss Elinor thought of the agreement no one ever learned. Elinor did not complain, though Christmas passed, and the new year came on, and nothing whatever had been done. There were no plans to be looked at. There wasn't a post in the ground or a building permit to tack upon that nonexistent post or contractors' agreements or strings pegged into the sandy earth. Mary-Love dallied throughout the winter, and whenever Oscar brought the subject up, she would cry, "Oh, Oscar, it's gone be the prettiest house in town!" and then in the next breath propound some excuse that took her out of the room.

. . .

In the spring of 1920 again came the rains, but they weren't as severe as the year before. Everyone was nervous, and looked askance at the rivers every time they came within sight of them—which, considering the geography of Perdido, was frequently enough—and it became a habit to ask Miss Elinor what she thought about the matter. After all, she paddled down the Perdido every day. Even on Saturday and Sunday, when she didn't have to teach, she'd row to church, with Oscar sitting idly and very much contented in the front of the boat.

If someone in his Sunday school class twitted him on his allowing Miss Elinor to do all that work, he'd reply only, "Lord, you think *I've* got the strength to get that boat past the junction? I have been thinking of hiring Elinor to go up the Blackwater and knock me down some cypress. She said she'd do it if I hired her a little boy to bring 'em all back to town."

Miss Elinor, who saw the river more closely than anyone, ought to know if a flood was imminent. Miss Elinor was reassuring: there would be no flood this year. How could she tell? By the way sticks floated down to the junction, and by what *kinds* of sticks floated down. By how quickly the whirlpool went around and what dead animals were sucked down to the riverbed. By the color of the Perdido mud—and no one before had ever thought that the Perdido mud changed color, but Miss Elinor assured them that it did indeed. By alterations in sandbars and eddies and how much clay was washed away along the banks—alterations people who lived in Perdido all their lives couldn't even see, must less interpret. And because Miss Elinor said so, everybody came to believe that there wasn't going to be a flood this year.

However, this didn't mean that there wasn't any rain. There was plenty of it. During the blooming of the azaleas, from late February into March, there were only light sprinklings, so that the blooms all died natural deaths upon their branches. When it came time for the roses to bloom, there were heavier rains, and water beat into the ground all around them.

If it would start to rain during school hours, Miss Elinor would send her children to raise the windows high. "Smell that rain!" Miss Elinor would cry, and the children filled their lungs with the water-sodden air. If she was at home, Miss Elinor sat on the front porch and pulled her chair up close to the steps. Zaddie and Grace stood on either side of her and watched as if hypnotized as the rainwater poured off the eaveless roof in a sheer curtain, splashing on the steps and the porch railing and soaking their feet

and the hems of their dresses. Zaddie and Grace would have pulled back, but Miss Elinor reassured them, “It’ll dry. Don’t worry, nothing dries faster than rainwater! It’s the sweetest water there is!” And she would lean forward and catch water in her cupped hands as it poured off the roof and hold it out for Grace and Zaddie to lap up like obedient dogs.

. . .

Oscar felt guilty not only for having given in to his mother, but because Elinor wouldn’t say to him that he had done wrong. The courtship continued as before, with this exception: whenever the subject of Mary-Love’s promised wedding gift or the date of the ceremony was brought up, Elinor was obstinately silent and could not be brought to respond to Oscar’s interrogatories with more than a grudging yes or a sullen no.

Oscar was determined to show Elinor that he wasn’t weak, that he could stand up to his mother. Of course he had made his bargain, and he had to stick to that, but there were to be no more bargains or changes; there would not be even a week’s delay in the wedding. And then there was the great question of the house. He told Mary-Love, “Mama, you are putting off.”

“I am not! Putting off about what?”

“About this house. You won’t see to it because you don’t want Elinor and me to get married.”

Mary-Love was silent. She couldn’t bring herself to speak so great a lie as a denial of that accusation would have been.

“Well, Mama, let me tell you,” Oscar went on, “Elinor and I are going to be married the Saturday after Thanksgiving whether there is a house there or not. And if there is no house, then we’re going to go live somewhere else. And ‘somewhere else’ may be in Perdido and it may not be...”

Mary-Love was persuaded by this single speech. She knew her son would do what he said, just as she was convinced he would keep the bargain he had made with her. Though the weather was still cold, she went to Mobile the next day and talked to some architects. One of these men came to Perdido the following Monday and looked at the lot and had further discussion with Mary-Love about what kind of house she had in mind. Construction on the house was begun the second week in March.

It was to be built on the far side of Mary-Love’s house, on the edge of the sandy lot next to the town line. In fact, all the windows on the west side

of the house would face directly into the wall of pine and hemlock that demarcated the edge of the Caskey property. It was set back farther from the road than Mary-Love's house, but since the Perdido curved northward just at that point, the houses were equidistant from the water. In order to begin building, six of Miss Elinor's trees had to be hewn down. These six trees were already of sufficient girth to be hauled away to the mill; there they were sliced into narrow planks, which eventually were used for the lattice-work on the back of the new house. In the whole business, Mary-Love's sole consolation was the destruction of these six of Elinor's trees.

Day after day the building went on no more than two hundred feet from where Elinor sat on the front porch of James Caskey's house. If she had stood and leaned forward only a little she might have seen the new house rising, but Elinor would not go to so much trouble as that. Zaddie, at her feet, said, "Miss El'nor, why don't you go and look at your new house?"

"Miss Mary-Love is building that house," said Elinor.

"But it's for you!" cried Grace, who had only lately grown accustomed to the notion that Elinor would be leaving. She had secretly formed a dim little plan to run away from home the day after Elinor married and send back a note that she would return only on the condition that she be adopted by Elinor.

"When that house is finished and belongs to Oscar and me," said Elinor, "there'll be time enough for me to go through and see what the rooms are like."

Oscar knew that Elinor hadn't been in the house, although by the first of May you could walk right up to the second floor. It was to be the biggest and finest house in Perdido, and he delighted in describing it to her; he ticked off its amenities and sketched diagrams of its layout as if it were a carved marble tomb on the other side of the world that he doubted she would ever visit rather than the house being constructed next door but one and which was intended for her own habitation. Elinor listened patiently to all his raptures, and when he had finished said merely, "It sounds as if it's going to be very nice, Oscar. I know you can hardly wait to be in it."

"But what about you! Mama is building this house as much for you as for me, Elinor!"

"Ohhh!" said Elinor, "I couldn't *begin* to think about that till the Saturday after Thanksgiving."

After one too many conversations just such as this, Oscar went to Sister and said, “Sister, Elinor thinks I’m gone back out. She thinks I’m gone let Mama trick me again—you know Mama tricked me, don’t you?”

“Elinor is just mad,” said Sister. “Elinor is just disappointed you weren’t smarter.”

“I wasn’t prepared!” Oscar protested. “Mama tricked me at the dinner table!”

“Men s’posed to be smarter than women,” said Sister.

“Nobody in Perdido has ever said that within *my* hearing,” said Oscar. “And, Sister, I don’t believe for one minute that you mean it!”

“No,” said Sister after a moment, “I *don’t* mean it. Listen to me, Oscar.” In her voice was a tone Oscar had never heard his sister employ before. They were in Sister’s room, and Sister motioned for Oscar to seat himself. He did so, in a chair near the window; he could see the river and he could see Elinor’s trees.

“Oscar, Elinor is biding her time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Elinor is waiting to see if you are gone act right.”

“Sister, I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“If you would stop and think,” said Sister in an exasperated voice, “you would know. The reason that Elinor has not said anything is that she wants to play fair.”

“Play fair?” Oscar echoed.

“Oscar, don’t you think that if Miss Elinor had put her foot down at the beginning you and she would be married this minute? Don’t you see that that house next door would be finished and you would be living in it?”

Oscar considered this a moment and then nodded his head in agreement.

“Oscar, you are dense—”

“I know it!” he exclaimed, and he meant it.

“—because you don’t see how much Elinor and Mama are alike. Mama tells you what to do and you do it. Elinor tells you what to do and you do it.”

“But, Sister, that’s the whole problem. Elinor won’t tell me what she wants!”

“Of course, she won’t,” said Sister. “She is waiting for you to do a little something on your own. That’s why she won’t say anything. She’s not

gone say anything against Mama. She's not gone tell you what you ought to do. But, Oscar...my Lord, if you sat down for five minutes you'd *know* what to do. And why you haven't done it, I'll never know!"

Sister got up and walked out of the room. Oscar sat there a quarter of an hour longer staring out the window at the river. In all his life he had never heard Sister speak so much to the purpose.

. . .

On the last Thursday in May, Oscar dropped by his uncle's house on his way home. As usual, Elinor, Zaddie, and Grace sat on the front porch. Zaddie and Elinor were shelling early peas; Grace was reading aloud from a book about Eskimos. Oscar leaned over close to Elinor and said without preamble, "Elinor, you think you could take tomorrow off from school?"

"I could," replied Elinor. "Is there a reason why I should?"

"There is," said Oscar.

"Then I'll do it," said Elinor. She didn't ask his reason.

"Why?" said Grace.

"Shhh!" said Oscar. "Not a word to my mama, not a word to anybody, you hear, Grace? You hear, Zaddie?"

"We hear!" cried Zaddie and Grace in unison.

"I'm taking off tomorrow, too," said Oscar. "Elinor, I'll be over just as soon as Mama leaves for Mobile. She is going with Caroline DeBordenave. Miss Caroline likes to leave early, I know that."

Elinor nodded, and said only, "Oscar, Miss Mary-Love is looking at you from the side porch and probably wondering what you are whispering about."

"Hey, Mama!" cried Oscar, as he turned and waved. "I'm home now!"

. . .

Caroline DeBordenave and Mary-Love Caskey left at seven o'clock the following morning in Caroline's automobile. They intended to stay the night in Mobile. Oscar, who had lingered over his breakfast so long that his mother began to wonder, got up and watched the car go off. "Sister," he said, "you gone help Elinor and me today?"

"Help you what?" asked Sister, slicing the crust off a piece of toast.

Oscar turned back with a grin.

"Help us get married, that's what."

. . .

Zaddie was raking the yard and glancing up at the clear sky, wondering when the clouds would roll in—she knew it was going to rain because Miss Elinor had told her so. Miss Elinor, Grace, and James Caskey were still at breakfast. Oscar walked into James's house without knocking.

Elinor said, "Zaddie is going over to the school at seven-thirty and tell Miz Digman I'm not feeling well." She still did not ask Oscar the reason for his request that she stay at home.

"I am head of the school board," said James Caskey. "Oscar, I cain't approve of Elinor's lying to Miz Digman, so I want you to tell Elinor and I want you to tell me what all this is about."

"Elinor and I are gone be married today."

Elinor didn't look a bit surprised. "What does Miss Mary-Love say to *that?"*

"I don't know," said Oscar.

"What about your bargain?" asked Elinor.

"Mama tricked me into that! Mama got me by surprise!"

"This is not going to make her happy, Oscar. She may even take back her house."

"And give it to who?" demanded James Caskey, actually pleased with Oscar's decision, even if it meant deceiving both Miz Digman and Mary-Love.

"Me!" cried Grace. "I want it. It's got a sleeping porch on the second floor and Aunt Mary-Love said there was gone be four swings on it. Daddy, you and me and Zaddie can live there."

"I am not leaving this house," replied James, who always responded to his daughter's wildest suggestions with the utmost gravity.

"Mama cain't do anything," said Oscar. "I have got a license and I have talked to Miz Driver and that is that."

"I'm glad," said James. "I think you are doing the right thing, Oscar. I think you are going about it the right way, but I just want Miss Elinor to know that we are all gone shrivel up and die without her. Aren't we, Grace?"

Grace nodded her head vigorously. "We're gone die!"

"You are not," said Elinor. "Where is this wedding supposed to take place? And when is it?"

"Today, of course. Today, while Mama is in Mobile. I don't know where, I—"

“Here!” cried Grace.

“Here,” said James. “Have it right here in the parlor.”

“All right,” said Oscar.

Elinor took Oscar’s proposal that they be married immediately with an almost bewildering calmness, as if she had for months past expected this most unexpected thing. She merely said, “Oscar, I want to finish my breakfast. Then I will have to see about something to wear. You haven’t given me much time to prepare.”

Sister, in fact, was seeing about the dress. She had called Miz Daughtry, the dressmaker, and before Elinor had got up from the table, that woman was knocking on the door. Elinor had a biscuit in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other as Miz Daughtry took her measurements.

All morning long, while Miz Daughtry sat in the sewing room and cut out the dress that Elinor Dammert was to be married in, Ivey Sapp baked cakes and pies, and Roxie Welles worked on the wedding supper. Zaddie took a hatchet and went down to the banks of the Perdido and hacked off tree branches to decorate James Caskey’s parlor.

Elinor and Oscar and James sat down for a hurried dinner at twelve o’clock, joined by Annie Bell Driver. Elinor had been in town almost a year now, but was close really to no one but James and Grace and Oscar. Outside the Caskey family and the children at the school, Elinor saw no one, with the exception of Annie Bell Driver, who would stop for a quarter-hour or so when she drove her wagon past James Caskey’s house and saw Miss Elinor sitting on the porch. Elinor and the female preacher were by no means intimate, but Annie Bell knew Mary-Love and knew what Mary-Love thought of the engagement of her son to Miss Elinor. So Oscar had asked Annie Bell to perform the wedding ceremony not only because of her friendship with Elinor, but also because no other preacher in town would risk Mary-Love’s displeasure.

After dinner Elinor sent Zaddie with a note to tell Miz Digman that she was feeling much better, so much better in fact that she had decided she might as well go on and get married to Oscar and probably wouldn’t be back in the school until Tuesday. Zaddie brought back congratulations from Miz Digman. She brought back Grace, too, which was just as well since Grace was almost delirious with thoughts of the wedding and hadn’t heard a word that her teacher had said all morning long. In the afternoon Elinor and Oscar packed for the honeymoon and Sister sat weeping on the front porch.

By two o'clock it had begun to rain, just a little at first from clouds that didn't even completely cover the sky. The sun shone through to the south, and formed a rainbow that arched over the Perdido. Ivey Sapp told Zaddie that the rain falling as the sun shone was indisputable evidence that the devil was beating his wife.

. . .

"Sister!" said Oscar, coming through the front door out onto the porch, "what are you crying for?"

"You're getting married, Oscar!"

"I know it," said Oscar. "I am doing it on purpose, too. I have gone out of my way."

"You are leaving me here with Mama. It's a crying shame! I want to go with you and Elinor tonight. Take me with you!"

"Sister, we cain't take you on our honeymoon. You know that."

"I want to go! I don't want to be the one to tell Mama you got married while she was out shopping for portieres!"

"*I'll* tell her—after the honeymoon. Though truth to tell, Sister, I don't much look forward to it. But it's my wedding and I'll be the one who tells her."

"Oscar, she's gone *know* as soon as she gets back and sees you gone and sees Elinor gone too!"

"You tell Mama we couldn't wait, you tell Mama I couldn't wait all summer long."

The rain was pouring down off the roof and splashing on the porch railing; Oscar pulled back. Elinor waved to him from next door. "Half an hour!" she called. "Send Zaddie over here and let Roxie fix her head!"

. . .

The wedding was at five o'clock. The parlor was decorated with the hemlock and cedar branches that had overspread the Perdido that morning. Miz Daughtry hadn't had time to finish the dress, and it was only basted together, so the dressmaker warned Elinor not to make any sudden moves or try to lift her arms. Zaddie and Grace were flower girls, dressed in white, with baskets of crape myrtle petals over their arms. James Caskey gave Elinor away. Roxie and Ivey and Bray were the only guests, and they stood in the dining room door. Sister sat on the sofa and wept bitter tears.

The rain never let up, and now the sky was completely clouded over.

To be heard over the noise of the rain beating against the windows and the roof, Annie Bell Driver had to speak as loudly as if she were delivering a sermon in a Mobile church. Rain rattled the windowpanes and splashed off the sills and dripped down the chimney until the entire room smelled of rain-soaked evergreens.

Bray had put the couple's suitcases in the Torpedo earlier, and Elinor wouldn't even take an umbrella to get through the downpour to the automobile parked in front of Mary-Love's house. The temporary stitches in her sleeve pulled apart as she lifted her arm to wave to everybody on the front porch. She sat laughing on the front seat as soaked-to-the-skin Oscar drove off down the street that was three inches deep in churning water dyed the color of the clay beneath—dyed red, Perdido red.

Chapter 7

Genevieve

By the afternoon of the first Monday in June the weather had turned hot in Perdido. The river behind the Caskey houses flowed low, muddier and redder than ever before. Mary-Love and Sister sat on the side porch out of the reach of the oppressive declining sun. Mary-Love had two large pieces of patterned cotton, one in light blue and the other in a pale violet, and by a cardboard pattern was cutting out squares and triangles. Sister, who had patience and a steady eye, was stitching these together to form large squares. In another week or so, they'd have enough to put together a quilt.

Sister looked up when Oscar's automobile pulled up in front of the house; Mary-Love didn't.

"Is that them, Sister?" Mary-Love asked calmly.

Sister looked apprehensively at her mother and nodded. Upon her return from Mobile the Saturday previous, Mary-Love had learned immediately from Sister of her son's precipitous wedding with the red-haired schoolteacher. But from the moment that that dread news fell trembling from Sister's lips, Mary-Love had allowed no one to speak a word about the subject. Friends—even Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk—with congratulations sincere or ironic, had been turned from the door. People felt that Mary-Love was taking it badly, but no one could know for sure. Certainly it must have been humiliating for your only son to get married one afternoon when you were down in Mobile picking out curtain material. Mary-Love hadn't even gone to church, and Sister for two days had been afraid to speak for fear some chance word would kindle her mother's dangerously smoldering resentment into searing flame.

"What is Miss Elinor wearing, Sister?"

"She looks real pretty, Mama."

"I'm sure she does," said Mary-Love, and her scissors went *clack-clack*.

Elinor and Oscar came up the flagstone walk to the front porch.

"We're around here!" Sister called from the side porch.

Elinor rounded the corner unhesitatingly. Oscar, with two suitcases, hung back. He had allowed himself to cherish a faint hope that his mother

had decided to leave town for a few weeks, and he stood still a moment, recovering from the disappointment that she was sitting there on the porch, awaiting their return with a pair of scissors in her hand.

"Afternoon, Sister. Afternoon, Miss Mary-Love. Oscar and I are back now."

"Oh, you're so pretty!" cried Sister, getting up so quickly that the unsewn squares and triangles of material spilled out of her lap onto the rug at her feet.

"Sister," cried her mother reproachfully, "I have gone to so much trouble...!"

"Mama, I'm sorry, but isn't Miss Elinor pretty, she—"

"She certainly is," said Mary-Love quickly. "Come here, Elinor, and kiss me." Obediently, Elinor went over and lightly kissed Mary-Love's upraised cheek. "Oscar," said Mary-Love.

Oscar came around the corner. "Mama, we're back."

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Oscar did so, and then the newly married couple stood together before Mary-Love's chair.

"So," said Mary-Love, "you just couldn't wait."

"Not one minute longer," said Elinor.

Mary-Love looked at them together for perhaps five seconds. Then she picked up her scissors and her cardboard pattern again. That was all *she* intended to say.

"Mama," Oscar began apologetically, "it's not that we didn't want you at the wedding, it's—"

"Don't apologize to me!" cried Mary-Love quickly, looking up at him once more. "I wasn't the one getting married! This has saved me trouble and expense! But you know, Oscar, that house next door is not ready for you yet. It's not near ready—"

"I know, but, Mama—"

"Where do you and Elinor intend on living, I'd like to know?"

"With James," replied Oscar. "James said we should just stay on in Elinor's room until our house is fixed up. He didn't want to lose us at all, and it would do him good to have us both around, he said. He said Grace wasn't ready to let go of Elinor, either."

Sister's teeth went *clack-clack*.

"What's wrong?" Oscar asked.

Elinor had seated herself in the swing across from Mary-Love, and Oscar backed down into it beside her.

"You're not gone be staying over there," said Mary-Love.

"You cain't stay with James!" cried Sister. "Poor Grace!"

"Why not?" demanded Oscar. "James told me—"

"Sit real still," said Mary-Love with her scissors poised. "Sit real still and be quiet." Elinor stopped rocking the swing, anchoring it with her foot. Oscar and Sister held their breaths. From across the yard they heard a woman's strident voice within James Caskey's house. Oscar then also noticed the absence of footprints in the sand between the houses, which was strange, for the constant back-and-forthing had resumed in recent months. The strident voice within the house rose and fell, and as they listened, it moved from the dining room window to the kitchen window.

Oscar had turned pale.

"Poor Grace," sighed Sister.

"Poor Roxie," said Mary-Love quickly. "Poor James."

"Lord," whispered Oscar, "Genevieve is back."

Elinor resumed her rocking. "When did she get here?" she asked.

"Yesterday morning," said Sister. "She was sitting on the front porch with two suitcases when James and Grace and I came back from church. She stood up and held out her arms and said, 'Grace, you come hug me,' and Grace wouldn't do it."

"Do you blame her?" said Mary-Love. "Would you have done it?"

"Genevieve *is* Grace's mama," said Sister.

"Elinor," said Mary-Love, "I don't know whether I'm glad or sad that you weren't here yesterday morning."

"Why is that, Miss Mary-Love?"

"There's nobody in this family that can handle Genevieve. *I* cain't. Sister, can you?"

"No!" wailed Sister. "Course I cain't!"

"And I know Oscar and James cain't. I have always thought that maybe you could. That is what I have *hoped*."

"I bet she could," said Oscar proudly. "I bet Elinor could handle anybody. Elinor," he said, turning to his wife, "why are they not asking you to head up the League of Nations? You have any idea why you have been passed over?"

Mary-Love ignored her son's facetious interruption. "But maybe it was better you and Oscar were off somewhere—where'd you go, anyway?"

"We were at Gulf Shores," replied Elinor. "I asked Oscar to take me there because I enjoy the water so much."

"Y'all ought to have seen Elinor in the waves," said Oscar proudly. "Elinor is not one bit afraid of undertow."

"I bet it was pretty!" cried Sister.

"It was," said Elinor. "But when it comes down to it, I feel more at home in fresh water than salt."

Mary-Love ignored this exchange as well. "Genevieve knows all about you, Elinor."

"What does she know?"

"Knows how you were living in James's house. Knows how you took care of him, and took care of Grace," said Mary-Love. "Knows everything there is to know," she concluded with a little meaningful nod.

"How does she know?" asked Elinor.

"Grace told her," said Sister. "Yesterday afternoon we were sitting here doing just what we're doing now, and there was Genevieve on the porch again with poor old Grace having to stand right in front of her and tell her everything that's happened in the past fifteen months."

"That's how long Genevieve has been in Nashville," Oscar explained. "We were kind of hoping she would stay away a month or two longer."

"We were hoping," Mary-Love corrected, "that she would stay away for the remainder of eternity. That is what we were hoping. I cain't deal with her—I get so *mad!"*

Mary-Love Caskey was in an ethical quandary. She couldn't approve of her son's sudden marriage to Elinor Dammert any more than she really approved of Elinor Dammert herself, but she had in her honesty acknowledged that she had never known James Caskey as happy as Elinor had made him since his mother's death. That point in Elinor's favor had become apparent really only with Genevieve's return. Mary-Love knew, at any rate, that she couldn't possibly do battle with both women at once, and so she might as well pit one against the other, even if that meant a sudden truce with Elinor—and even if that truce fostered the inaccurate impression that Elinor had been forgiven for her marriage to Oscar.

"Elinor," said Mary-Love after a few moments, "you are going to be cramped upstairs, I'm afraid."

"Mama, you want us *here?* I thought—"

"Where else would you go?" Mary-Love demanded. "Is there someplace else in this town where you could stay except the Osceola? Have you thought of Elinor's memories of that hotel, Oscar? Or do you intend on moving into a house that doesn't have all its walls yet?"

"No, but—"

"No buts," said Mary-Love. "Elinor, you'll be happy to know that Oscar's room looks out on the river. You love that old Perdido!"

. . .

Genevieve Caskey was neither as unpleasant nor as dangerous as Mary-Love's talk suggested. She was scarcely more than a shrew, and at times she wasn't even that. She had married James Caskey because of his money and because by nature he was easily dominated. She made her husband unhappy principally because James had no business being married in the first place. He had the heart and the mind of the perennial bachelor, and the acquisition of a wife had done nothing to erase the stamp of femininity with which he was so firmly branded. Perhaps Genevieve's offensive reputation in Perdido was due to no more than the fact that Mary-Love had taken a preliminary dislike to her, and carefully fostered that dislike until it had grown into loathing—and dread. And perhaps Mary-Love's friends had adopted that attitude—in each of its progressively virulent stages—out of politeness to Mary-Love. And perhaps the entire town had grown so used to hearing of Genevieve Caskey as a monster of selfishness, ill humor, and drunkenness that it could no longer look upon James Caskey's wife in any other light, even when Genevieve's behavior—which actually was relatively mild—did nothing to support those widely held opinions.

Genevieve had spent three years in Perdido immediately after her marriage, and there was not a person introduced to her who didn't find out within five minutes that Genevieve Caskey thought that Perdido, Alabama, was the slowest, dullest, smallest, most insignificant town in the entire South. "I could have more fun in thirty minutes in New Orleans or Nashville just standing on a corner than I could spending the rest of my life in Perdido. The most exciting thing to do in Perdido is sit on the bank of the river and count the dead possums floating by!"

Thus, concretely, it might have been said against Genevieve that she wasn't a woman who was at pains to accommodate to her husband. The same might have been said about a number of other wives in Perdido.

Genevieve's other indisputable flaw was that she drank. Manda Turk maintained that Genevieve Caskey would have walked through the front door of a saloon if ladies had been allowed in—or if Perdido had had one. Everybody knew she drank, even though Roxie tied the bottles up in croker sacks, wrapped in rags so they wouldn't rattle. When her boy Escue drove his goat cart to the dump with the croker sacks in the back, people looked and said, "Oh, Lord, there goes James Caskey's curse!" Genevieve would drink anything she could get. She'd buy from the Indians out in the piney woods, and the two little girls on the swayback mule would bring it to the door. She'd send Bray over the Florida state line, where liquor sales were legal, and have him cart it back by the case. She'd sit right in the front window, in the daytime, with a bottle and a glass sitting on the table in front of her.

Yet she was beautiful and her dresses came from New York. She was also smart as a whip, and could rattle off all three names of every president the men of the United States had ever voted into office. When she stayed away, which was most of the time, James Caskey sent her seven hundred dollars a month and paid the bills that she had directed to Perdido. When she came to Perdido, he cowered in her presence and gave her anything else she asked for.

Grace Caskey dreamed of her mother every night, but rarely pleasantly. When Genevieve was away, Grace wanted her home and when she was home she wanted her to go away. The child regarded her mother with an awe that had very little in it of affection. On her rare trips home, Genevieve Caskey would look her daughter up and down, and first thing—before she would even kiss the child—she would sit down on the porch, dig a hard-bristled brush out of her purse, and brush the child's hair and scalp until Grace wept from the pain. As she brushed and Grace wept, Genevieve Caskey would cry, "Oh, one of these days, honey, I'm taking you away from your daddy. I'm taking you away from this town. I'm gone show you Nashville! You and I are gone walk down those streets like nobody's business. We are gone get your daddy to buy us a brand-new automobile and I'm gone drive you around and show you off as the prettiest seven-year-old in the entire state of Tennessee!" Grace didn't dare protest that she didn't want to leave either her father or Perdido, and she lived in mortal fear that when Genevieve went away again, as Genevieve always did, suddenly

and without warning, she would be locked in one of her mother's suitcases and spirited off to Nashville.

James Caskey heard these promises—or threats—but he knew that his wife had no real thought of encumbering herself with their daughter. He didn't know and didn't want to know what sort of life Genevieve led in Nashville, but he knew that whatever it was like, a seven-year-old child was likely to interfere with its pleasures.

. . .

Oscar and Elinor hadn't even had the chance to take their bags inside the house that Monday afternoon before they heard the back door of James Caskey's house slam. Sister stood up and peered over the camellias.

"Oh, Lord, Mama, here comes Genevieve! And I don't believe it, she's carrying a pound cake on a round platter."

Mary-Love stood up and so did Oscar. Elinor remained in the swing.

"Hey, Genevieve!" Oscar called out.

"Is she sober? Does she look sober to you, Sister?" Mary-Love hissed.

"Hey, Oscar!" Genevieve called back. "I heard you got married. I heard I missed the wedding by thirty-six hours and I was sick at my heart to hear it! I am bringing your new wife a pound cake." She marched across the yard, obliterating a number of Zaddie's painstaking swirls.

She mounted the steps of the side porch. "Mary-Love, Sister," she said in greeting. This was a very mild greeting indeed, for the fact was, since she had arrived Genevieve had not set eyes upon Mary-Love and had seen Sister only once. Genevieve looked in Elinor's direction and smiled. "You're Miss Elinor. Ooooh, my little girl is just in love with you! You have taken such good care of her! This time it looks like I'm not gone have to burn all her dresses. Miss Elinor, I brought this cake for you. I made Roxie sit in the corner while I made it myself."

"Thank you, Miz Caskey."

"You call me Genevieve. I put two pounds of white sugar in that cake. I am paying you back for making my husband fat in my protracted absence," Genevieve said with a smile.

Elinor smiled back. "James was very good to me, and took me in when I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Oh, James is like that. That's just what James is like. Where do you come from, Miss Elinor? Who are your people?"

. . .

Later, when Genevieve had gone back home, Sister and Oscar declared that they had never seen the woman so friendly. Mary-Love said, “I cain’t believe my own children would be taken in like that! Elinor, did you think she was friendly?”

“I think she wanted to get a good look at me. That is what I think,” replied Elinor.

“I think you are right,” said Mary-Love, though she wasn’t pleased to find herself on Elinor’s side against her own flesh and blood, even if the point was minor and made to the disparagement of Genevieve. “And, Elinor, I bet you think we have been doing Genevieve a disservice, talking about her like we have. I bet you think she’s not as bad as we’ve painted her. I bet you think maybe she *doesn’t* have a case of bourbon in the back of James’s closet.”

“I think,” said Elinor, “that Genevieve heard about as much about me as I’ve heard about her and she wanted to see what was true and what wasn’t.”

“Genevieve was being polite,” protested Oscar. “Mama, cain’t you and Elinor give her some credit?”

“She walked right by me,” said Sister. “If she had had liquor on her breath, I would have smelled it. And she didn’t.”

“Sister,” said Elinor, “the thing Genevieve Caskey would like most in this entire world would be to throw me headfirst in the Perdido River.”

“And are you gone give her a chance to do it?” asked Oscar.

“I am not,” replied Elinor, and everybody believed her.

Chapter 8

The Wedding Gift

As soon as school was over for Elinor at the beginning of June she and Oscar took a real wedding journey. They went to New York and Boston, and to everyone's surprise they traveled by boat from Pensacola. That was Elinor's idea, but most people thought it a clever one. Since the coming of the speedy trains no one thought of traveling by water; traveling by water was the poor man's transport. Anyone could jump on the back of a log and end up tomorrow night floating around in the Gulf of Mexico.

When Elinor returned from their honeymoon she and Mary-Love and Sister settled down in a polite truce ("for Oscar's sake," Mary-Love said). Even to such close and observant neighbors as Manda Turk and Caroline DeBordenave, the three women appeared to get along perfectly well. When Manda Turk rose with a toothache early one morning just at dawn, looked out her bedroom window and saw Elinor Caskey swimming around in the river wearing nothing but a white cotton shift, and later commented on the irregularity and possible impropriety of such a proceeding, Mary-Love went so far as actually to defend her daughter-in-law. "Oh, Manda," sighed Mary-Love, "when yours get married, just wait, you'll see then how behind the times you are. I have come to believe that there is nothing wrong with early morning exercise."

Elinor and Oscar shared the room that before had been Oscar's alone. The largest bedchamber in the house, it was at the back of the second story. It had a small sitting room attached, and three windows that looked out over the Perdido. Despite these amenities, Oscar and Elinor would have preferred to be on their own, and not beneath the constantly watchful eye of Mary-Love Caskey.

There had been a halt in the progress of the house next door. There was only one contracting firm in Perdido—"firm" being a kind word for two white men named Hines and seven colored men who worked under them for one dollar and twenty-five cents a day. Henry Turk had begged Mary-Love to release the Hines brothers from their commitment to her so that they might be set to the task of rebuilding a new pulpwood storage barn for the Turk mill. Of the three millowners, Henry Turk had been most severely

affected by the flood, and still was not quite recovered. Unknown to the other, Oscar and James had each lent him money, and those very funds were to be employed for this necessary construction. Mary-Love was pleased as punch to turn the contractors over to Henry, and she told him to keep them as long as he wanted. She even offered—as long as he promised not to tell—to lend him ten thousand dollars in case there was anything else he wanted put up on his property. So the workmen went away, and the summer rains drummed down into what should have been rooms that provided privacy and contentment to Elinor and Oscar, but which were still only open areas of beams and planks and studs.

Oscar apologized to his wife for the delay. Elinor said only, "If it could be helped, Oscar, you'd be doing something, I imagine."

This cold reply goaded him into a bit of action, and he went to his mother, asking if he might not go down to Bay Minette and over to Atmore and Jay to see if there weren't someone else available for the job. The house ought to have been long finished by this time, he pointed out.

Mary-Love pointed out that a contract was a contract, and she had signed one with the Hines brothers, and she wasn't about to go back on it now. Oscar had to admit the justice of this, and at the same time reflected that it was, after all, his mother's money that was paying for everything and that she ought to do things exactly as she wanted them and no other way.

For the summer then, the uneasy Caskey household of Elinor and Oscar and Mary-Love and Sister settled down to a routine of getting along with one another. They felt hemmed in a little with the unfinished construction on one side of them—boards were already beginning to darken with exposure—and Genevieve Caskey on the other. Mary-Love declared she didn't even like to look out the windows anymore. But of Mary-Love's three main sources of unease—her daughter-in-law who couldn't be managed the way Sister and Oscar could; her skeletal wedding gift half-risen out of the sand; or the specter of a mobilized Genevieve, lurching down the street swinging a bottle and forever disgracing the good Caskey name—she was probably most disturbed by Genevieve.

Every morning Mary-Love's household took breakfast on the screened-in side porch, and every morning Mary-Love asked her family: "Well, do you think today will be the day that Genevieve goes back to Nashville?" But it never was the day. Genevieve had remained in Perdido longer than anytime since the beginning of her marriage.

“I think *I* know why she’s staying,” said Sister one morning in a low voice.

“Why?” said Oscar quickly. It is a great mistake to imagine that men care less for gossip than women.

“Because of Elinor,” replied Sister, nodding to her sister-in-law.

“Why me?” asked Elinor, who was rocking with her coffee.

“Genevieve comes back here and she discovers that her husband has been happy in her absence. James had you, Elinor. He had you to take care of him and Grace, and you made him happy.”

“James was good to me,” said Elinor simply. “And I dote on Grace.”

“We all do,” snapped Mary-Love. “Except for Genevieve. If she cared a straw for those two, she’d throw herself into the junction directly. Elinor, maybe one day you ought to take her for a ride in Bray’s little boat.”

Elinor smiled, then looked in the direction of James Caskey’s house, though her view, for the practical purpose of observation, was obscured by camellias. “They seem to be doing all right. I don’t believe that Genevieve has made *so* much of a problem of herself.”

“Have you talked to Grace, Elinor?” said Mary-Love. “Grace is not a happy child, not the way she was happy when it was you living over there and not her mama. I wish things were the way they used to be.”

It was not lost on anyone on that porch that “the way they used to be” denoted a time before Oscar and Elinor were married.

Ivey brought out more coffee and said: “Miss Genevieve thinks Miss Elinor gone talk Mr. James into getting a divorce.”

“How you know that, Ivey?” asked Oscar.

“Zaddie told me,” replied Ivey, and went back inside.

“Zaddie would know,” Elinor pointed out.

“That child listens at windows!” cried Mary-Love, who had never forgiven Zaddie for becoming Elinor’s creature. “She climbs on a cement block and leans her face against the screen!”

“No, she doesn’t,” said Elinor calmly. “Zaddie’s just got good ears, and in the morning when she’s out raking the yard she hears things through open windows.”

“Would you try to talk James into a divorce, Elinor?” her husband asked.

“I don’t believe in divorce,” said Elinor. “But I don’t believe in marrying the wrong person, either,” she added after a moment.

So Genevieve remained in Perdido. If she drank, at least she didn't drink sitting in the front window, nor did she go down the sidewalk swinging a bottle. She'd go to church and sit in the Caskey pew next to Elinor, but she wouldn't go to Sunday school; this, Mary-Love maintained, was so she wouldn't have to talk to anybody. The half-hour between Sunday school and morning service was a great social occasion at every church in Perdido, and if Genevieve showed up during the organ prelude, then she didn't have to speak to anybody. And that's exactly what Genevieve did, sidling into the pew and taking hold of Grace's hand and only nodding to Elinor, Sister, and Mary-Love.

Once or twice Genevieve invited Elinor to ride with her down to Mobile to go shopping, and Elinor accepted the invitation. Genevieve liked to drive herself, and the two women took Zaddie along to carry packages. When Genevieve shopped, with James's money, there was sure to be a great load for Zaddie to balance on her outstretched arms. Mary-Love totally approved of these excursions. "Oh, Sister," she'd say, nodding, "it gets Elinor out of the house—and it's like old times, just you and me and Oscar here for dinner. It also means that Elinor has to deal with Genevieve and we don't."

"They get along all right," Sister pointed out.

"I'm not a bit surprised," said Mary-Love darkly.

"But I also think," said Sister in Elinor's defense, "that she is trying to keep an eye on Genevieve. It's because of what you said about Grace being unhappy with her mama. Elinor loves that child the way we do!"

. . .

Oddly, it was Genevieve Caskey who was to alter the entire future and aspect of Perdido. Weary of listening to James's stories of the flood and his fears of its possible recurrence, she suggested, "Well, why in the world don't you just build a levee?"

James Caskey fell back into his chair in astonishment that no one had thought of such a simple solution before.

"Natchez has a levee," Genevieve pointed out. "New Orleans has a levee. Those places don't flood. There's no reason Perdido cain't have a levee, is there? If Perdido had a levee I wouldn't have to look at that damn river anymore."

The idea took hold of James Caskey. He told Oscar about it, and the next night brought it up as new business before the school board, though it

was not, strictly speaking, within the school board's scope of concern. Oscar, however, broached the matter at town council meeting, but by then all of Perdido had discussed and mostly approved the idea. Only two people in town were against the earthen embankment: one was an ancient white woman who lived on the edge of Baptist Bottom and said that murderous spirits were fostered in mounds of earth. The other was Elinor Caskey.

Elinor declared the levee ugly, costly, and impractical. Above the junction, the levee would have to be built all along the southern bank of the Perdido—this would not only spoil their view of the river and take away the mooring dock, it would hem them in till they would all think they were going to smother. On the Blackwater side, the three sawmills would no longer have free access to the river. Logs that were to be sent downstream to other sawmills or to the Gulf would have to be dragged all the way south of town. Below the junction, the levee would have to be built on both sides of the river, to protect downtown, the workers' houses, and Baptist Bottom. New bridges would have to be constructed, at enormous expense, and in the end Perdido would look as if it had been sunk into an old clay quarry. The town would have sacrificed its charm and received in exchange nothing but the illusion of safety. *Illusion of safety*, because no levee could be built so strong or so high that it would hold back the river water when the river water wanted to rise. A flood, Elinor declared vehemently, wasn't to be held back by mounds of earth.

"Lord, Genevieve," said Elinor the morning after the town council meeting at which funds for an engineering study were approved. "I don't know why you wanted to make trouble and bring it up!"

"This town is gone wash away in the next heavy rain if they don't build 'emselves a levee." Genevieve was standing in her kitchen, mixing a cake. She put in a whole cup of dark rum, using the liquor instead of milk. "I for one will be glad of it, too. I hate the sight of that water, Elinor. I know you like to swim in it and all, but give me dust and dry land! The Lord God deliver me from a watery grave!"

. . .

Despite Mary-Love's best efforts for a delay, the house next door was finished the last week in July. The Hines brothers displayed an inconvenient sort of honesty, which dictated as strict a compliance with their original deadline as possible. Mary-Love pleaded with each of the brothers in private to follow their own best interests and work on Henry Turk's

projects, but each of the brothers held up his hand, and said, “Miz Caskey, a promise is a promise, and we know how anxious Oscar is to get his new house.”

So, on the seventh of August, right after church, Elinor set foot for the first time in the mansion that was her wedding gift. Oscar showed her around with pride. It was, in fact, a very fine house: large, square, and white. On the first floor were a kitchen, a breakfast room, two pantries, a back porch for washing, a dining room, two parlors, and a narrow front porch for rocking. On the second floor, arranged around a central hallway, were two bedroom suites containing bedchamber, sitting room, dressing room, and bath; two more smaller bedrooms; a nursery or maid’s room; a third bath; and a vast screened-in sleeping porch in the back corner, that overlooked the Perdido. It was this last room that seemed to please Elinor most.

“Mama,” said Oscar excitedly, on their return to his mother’s house, “Elinor just loves it!”

“How could she not?” said Mary-Love calmly.

“It’s a beautiful house,” said Elinor, who in Mary-Love’s opinion might have said a good deal more, perhaps adding such words as, *Thank you, Miss Mary-Love.*

“Mama, when can we move in?” Oscar asked. “We’re both anxious!”

“Oh, not yet!” Mary-Love cried. “Oscar, did you see any draperies up in that house?”

“No, but—”

“Do you want all and sundry looking in your windows? Sister and I are beginning work on the draperies this week. And Friday week we’re going to Mobile to look for furniture.”

“Mama,” said Oscar, “it doesn’t have to be *perfect*, you know. Elinor and I are gone be living in that house for the rest of our lives. There will be time enough to fill it up with furniture.”

“Think of me!” cried Mary-Love. “Think of Sister and me. How you think we’re gone feel when Elinor invites people over and they come in and look? People are gone say, ‘Lord, if this was a wedding gift from Mary-Love Caskey, I cain’t say she put herself out when it came furniture and drapery time.’”

“Mama,” pleaded Oscar, “there’s not a person in this town who’s gone say that.”

"They'll *think* it," Mary-Love insisted, and the upshot was that Oscar and Elinor remained under Mary-Love's roof while their finished home sat empty.

Mary-Love kept up a careful pretense of furnishing the house. She was driven to Mobile once a week to select drapery fabric and dining room suites and carpets and crystal. Mary-Love shopped with all the apparent pleasure of a condemned criminal picking out the rope with which he is to be hanged. She never returned to Perdido with more than one item, and sometimes that solitary purchase was laughably small. Women had gotten the vote. Women might elect a president of their own sex by the time that Mary-Love had filled that house to her satisfaction.

Sister sometimes went along on these excursions, but never with complete willingness. She was requisitioned by her mother not for the assistance she might lend in the matter of purchases, but rather in her capacity as listening post. Outside of Perdido, and away from Oscar and the servants, Mary-Love could rave about Elinor without stint. It was Mary-Love's custom to go down on a Friday morning, shop Friday afternoon, visit friends in the evening—she had been born in Mobile, and still had people there—put up at the Government House, do more shopping on Saturday, and return home by suppertime Saturday night. Oscar particularly looked forward to these days when his mother was absent, for Mary-Love so much paraded the air of the martyr, with a dour face and words, that the atmosphere of the house was brightened every time she walked out the door.

It had not been lost on Oscar that Elinor had not said a word when Mary-Love had denied them permission to move into their own home. He remembered his conversation with Sister and understood now that Elinor was waiting for him to act properly in the matter. But how to act properly was exactly the difficulty. When he attempted to explain to his wife why he was giving in to his mother in this matter—saying that, after all, the house *was* Mary-Love's gift and she ought to be able to fix it up exactly the way she wanted it—Elinor wouldn't listen.

"Oscar, this is between you and Miss Mary-Love. When you make a decision, you tell me what it is—that's all I need to know about it."

Oscar sighed. He loved Elinor and he was very happy being married to her. But sometimes he looked at her closely and he wondered to himself, *Who is she?* That was a question he couldn't begin to answer.

What he *did* know was that Elinor was very much like his mother: strong-willed and dominant, wielding power in a fashion he could never hope to emulate. That was the great misconception about men: because they dealt with money, because they could hire someone on and later fire him, because they alone filled state assemblies and were elected congressional representatives, everyone thought they had power. Yet all the hiring and firing, the land deals and the lumber contracts, the complicated process for putting through a constitutional amendment—these were only bluster. They were blinds to disguise the fact of men's real powerlessness in life. Men controlled the legislatures, but when it came down to it, they didn't control *themselves.* Men had failed to study their own minds sufficiently, and because of this failure they were at the mercy of fleeting passions; men, much more than women, were moved by petty jealousies and the desire for petty revenges. Because they enjoyed their enormous but superficial power, men had never been forced to know themselves the way that women, in their adversity and superficial subservience, had been forced to learn about the workings of their brains and their emotions.

Oscar knew that Mary-Love and Elinor could think and scheme rings around him. They got what they wanted. In fact, every female on the census rolls of Perdido, Alabama, got what she wanted. Of course, no man admitted that he was railroaded by his mother, his sister, his wife, his daughter, his cook, or by any female who happened to walk along the street toward him—most of them, in fact, didn't even know it. But Oscar did; yet even knowing of his inferiority, his real powerlessness, he was helpless to throw off any of the fetters that bound him.

Who was Elinor Caskey? And where did she come from? She didn't talk about her people. They had lived in Wade, in Fayette County, and now they were all dead. Her father had once run a ferry across the Tombigbee River. Elinor had gone to Huntingdon College, but Oscar didn't even know who had paid for her schooling. She never talked about her girlfriends in Montgomery, never got letters from them, never wrote herself. Elinor had appeared one day in a corner room of the Osceola Hotel and Oscar had married her. That's all there was to it.

Elinor wasn't Oscar's only mystery, of course. There were many things Oscar didn't understand. He didn't understand what was going on between Mary-Love and Elinor; he only knew that he was glad he wasn't at home all day the way Sister was. He didn't know what Elinor saw in him; he didn't

know why she loved him, though apparently she did. He'd get up at five in the morning, and stand at his bedroom window and look out at the Perdido. There he'd see his wife, wearing her coarse cotton nightgown, swimming around and around in the swift water that would have drowned any normal person. And there'd be Zaddie, sitting on the mooring dock, dangling her feet in the current and holding her rake across her lap. The sun wouldn't even be over the trees yet. And good Lord!—the water oaks that Elinor had planted only a little more than a year before were twenty feet high and a foot around! They were planted in clumps of two and three and four, and at the level of the ground their trunks were already starting to grow together. Water oaks, Oscar knew, were the only oak trees that would clump like birches. Zaddie would rake a vast system of concentric circles around each clump, and now the yard resembled a cypress swamp, but with slender oaks and raked sand taking the place of clumps of cypress and rippling water.

They were narrow spindly trees with gray bark and tiny leathery dark-green leaves that grew only at the top. Lower branches quickly lost their leaves, rotted, and fell to the earth, to be gathered up by Zaddie and tossed into the river. In the winter the leaves turned an even darker green, but didn't fall off until pushed aside by new growth in the spring. Beyond the camellia and azalea beds that grew alongside the houses the sandy yards still wouldn't grow a single blade of grass, but those water oaks grew faster than any tree Oscar had ever seen—and the Caskeys had made their fortune through intimate and extensive knowledge of the forests and trees of Baldwin County. His bedroom view of the river would soon be obscured by the foliage of the water oaks. Sometimes he would come home in the afternoon and see that strange youthful forest that had raised itself and he would exclaim: "Mama, have you ever seen anything like the way those trees have grown!"

And Mary-Love on the side porch would only say: "Those are Elinor's trees."

And Sister, sitting beside her, would say: "Elinor loves 'em."

And Elinor, opening the front door for him, would say: "These yards won't grow a blade of grass. We had to have *something."*

Chapter 9

The Road to Atmore

It was generally understood in Perdido that the intimacy that had formed between Genevieve Caskey and Elinor Caskey—two women who had every cause to dislike and mistrust each other—had its origin in each lady's desire to keep an eye on the other. Caroline DeBordenave and Manda Turk congratulated Mary-Love on the possession of a daughter-in-law who would go to such lengths for the well-being of the family. Mary-Love did not accept the compliment, and maintained that Genevieve and Elinor were exactly suited to each other. It was no more than the fellow-feeling of moral criminals, she said, that sent them off to Mobile together shopping for shoes. However, after Genevieve's suggestion that a levee be built to protect Perdido from high water, Elinor in a fury declared, "I won't have anything more to do with that woman."

The summer went on, and like all summers in that part of the world, it was brutally hot. The thermometer outside the kitchen window of Mary-Love's house read at least eighty degrees every morning at six-thirty when Zaddie began to rake. By the time she was finished at nine, the temperature had hit ninety. The Caskey women remained out on the side porch all morning long, sewing on their patchwork quilt, though none of them could think—in such heat—that there would be a season when a quilt would be wanted on someone's bed.

They also took their dinners on the side porch as soon as Oscar came home. They drank vast quantities of iced tea. In the afternoon, the weather was at its most oppressive. It accumulated in the leathery leaves of the water oaks and burned the sand of the yards until it was so hot that it could scorch a bare foot.

The heat was quiet. On the worst afternoons there was no noise at all. Birds had fled so deeply into the forest that their calls could no longer be heard. Dogs had crept into the cool sand beneath houses and lay miserably with their heads upon their outstretched forepaws. People didn't visit one another because they feared falling down in a faint on the sidewalk if they ventured out of the shade. And those remaining at home didn't talk much

because they were logy from having drunk too much iced tea with their dinner.

On one particular such afternoon, at about three o'clock, nothing at all could be heard around the Caskey houses except the lapping of the river water against the pilings of the mooring dock. Sister and Elinor sat on a glider on the side porch. The edge of the quilting frame was tilted down toward them and they were slowly working on the second line of squares. Elinor had never done a quilt before, so for her benefit and instruction Sister had suggested using the simplest quilting stitch she knew. Complaining how her eyes watered in such heat, Mary-Love had abandoned her place at the frame. She now rocked in her chair across from the two women and occasionally addressed a remark to no one in particular, which no one in particular saw fit to answer. Ivey Sapp sat nearby shelling peanuts into a wide white enameled pan and discarding the shells onto sheets of newspaper unfolded at her feet.

The quiet that had persisted for some time was suddenly broken by a scream—a tiny, convulsive scream that came, quite obviously, from James Caskey's house. Sister and Elinor pushed their needles through the fabric and turned their heads in unison; Mary-Love stood up from her chair; Ivey leaned forward and placed her white enameled bowl on the floor of the porch.

"Lord!" said Elinor after a moment. "That is Grace!"

"That *is* Grace!" said Sister.

They hadn't known it immediately, because no one had ever heard Grace scream before.

"What is that woman doing?" said Mary-Love, turning pale. "What is she doing to Grace?"

There was another scream, choked off after a few seconds. Then the back door of James Caskey's house suddenly slammed and the women on the porch, all standing now, saw Zaddie running across the yard toward them. She was obviously terrified.

She clambered breathlessly up the front steps. "Miss Genevieve is *beating* on Grace!"

In the brief silence that followed Zaddie's announcement, they could hear another of Grace's convulsive sobs, then another scream, stifled immediately.

"What did Grace do?" cried Mary-Love.

“She went and done knocked over a lamp by the cord!” said Zaddie breathlessly. Her speech, in moments of stress, lost the polish it had gained in her extensive reading. “Grace and me were playing in the hall, just playing, and Grace went and catched her foot on the cord and knocked over the lamp and it went and broke and Miss Genevieve come out and she done picked up that lamp and done heaved it at me but it didn’t hit me. Then she went and picked up Grace and started in to *beat* her!”

“Mama, you got to stop her! Listen to that child!”

Grace was screaming again. The sound was now coming through a different window.

“Miss Genevieve is chasing her through the house!” said Ivey.

Mary-Love was indecisive. It was her policy to have as little as possible to do with Genevieve Caskey, and it was not Caskey policy either to interfere with the instruction and rearing of children—and children who were reared and instructed properly *did* sometimes cry.

“If no one else is going to do anything, I will,” said Elinor in disgust. With that she went right through the screen door, down the side steps, right across the yard, and through James Caskey’s front door without a single hesitation in her stride.

Sister, Mary-Love, Ivey, and Zaddie stood all in a line, looking over the camellias, scarcely daring to breathe. Faintly, through the windows of the neighboring house, they heard Elinor’s voice, “Grace! Grace!”

In another moment the front door of James Caskey’s house opened and Grace Caskey came flying out. She ran directly across the yard and up the side steps. Zaddie ran to her and Grace jumped into the black girl’s arms. Zaddie hugged her tight. Mary-Love and Sister pulled the girl away and stared into her face.

“Child,” cried Mary-Love, “you are red in the face. You are bruised!”

“Mama hit me!” cried Grace. “Mama hit me with a belt!”

“In the face?” said Mary-Love, unwilling to believe that even of Genevieve Caskey. “Child, she could have put out one of your eyes!”

Zaddie was in the corner conferring in whispers with her older sister. Ivey came forward a moment later and said quietly, “Miss Mary-Love, Zaddie say Miss Genevieve been drinking...”

Mary-Love slowly shook her head, and Sister sat down in the swing and lifted up Grace, putting the child’s head in her lap and smoothing down her hair. Holding her hands in front of her face, Grace began to weep. In

that position, it could be seen that Grace's underpants had been torn off and that her legs and bottom also bore the marks of Genevieve's belt. Two lines of blood showed where the buckle had torn the flesh of Grace's thigh.

Mary-Love turned and looked across to the Caskey house. What was Elinor saying to Genevieve?

Elinor's head was suddenly thrust out the dining room window. "Zaddie!" she called out.

"Yes'm?" cried out Zaddie.

"You go to the mill and fetch Mr. James—this minute, you hear?"

Elinor's head disappeared. Zaddie went over to the swing and held Grace's trembling hand for a moment.

"Go on, child!" cried Mary-Love. "Do as Miss Elinor says!"

. . .

Sister took Grace up to her own room, washed her face, and after lowering the blinds and closing the curtains, put Grace onto the bed. She sat at Grace's side, whispering words of consolation and fanning her face—for the room was stifling and dark—until the child was asleep. Then Sister seated herself in a rocker at the foot of the bed with the fan in one hand and a novel in the other. She wanted to make sure that if the child woke up she wouldn't find herself alone.

Mary-Love remained on the side porch with Ivey, and the two women watched the house next door with unabated and ungratified interest. They saw nothing; they heard nothing. James drove up in his automobile twenty minutes after Zaddie had left to fetch him. The black girl jumped out of the car first, and James went not to his own house but to his sister-in-law's. He stood between two great camellias and spoke to Mary-Love.

"James," said Mary-Love, "did Zaddie tell you what happened?"

He nodded. "Where is Grace?"

"She's in Sister's room. And she is gone stay there until—"

"Where is Genevieve?"

"Genevieve and Elinor are over there"—Mary-Love pointed at James's house—"but what they are saying to each other I have no idea. James, I don't know if you remember it, but Genevieve once came after me with a broom!"

James did indeed remember it, and didn't have to be reminded of the circumstance. "What do you suppose Elinor is *saying* to her?"

“I have no idea,” repeated Mary-Love impatiently, “all I know is you better get on over there.”

James turned and walked reluctantly across the yard toward his own house. But before he got there the front door opened and Elinor came out with two suitcases. She was grim.

“Mr. James,” she said, “put these in the car.”

“Elinor,” he said in a whisper, “did you talk to Genevieve?”

“There’s two more,” said Elinor, and she went back into the house.

Zaddie and James loaded the four suitcases into the car; then came three hat boxes, a jewelry case, and two smaller cases that contained they didn’t know what. They were all in dark blue leather and bore the gold initials, *GC.* Genevieve herself came last of all, wearing a black dress and a black veil so thick you couldn’t have seen her face if you had walked right up to her and raised a lantern.

“Lord,” cried Ivey in a whisper to Mary-Love, “she must be burning up in there.”

“Who went after who with a broom is what I want to know,” remarked Mary-Love.

Elinor came out of the house after Genevieve and stood before the front door as if guarding it.

“Elinor,” said James, who did not dare to speak to his wife, “where are we going?”

“Over to Atmore. Genevieve’s catching the Hummingbird to Nashville. And, James—you are not going to drive.”

Genevieve was already climbing into the car. If ever a woman’s posture indicated defeat, Mary-Love said to Ivey, that woman’s did.

“Then how’s she gone get there?” demanded James in perplexity. He was greatly relieved that the women were handling this very difficult situation—somehow the women always *did*—but he wished they had made it a little easier for him to understand the part that had been written for him in this little drama.

“You are going to let Bray drive her, and Zaddie’s going to ride in the back,” replied Elinor.

Hearing that, Ivey ran over to the new house to fetch Bray who was planting camellias and hawthorns in the side yard. He wasn’t even allowed to change out of his gardening clothes into his uniform, but got directly into

the automobile. With Zaddie in the back and Genevieve silent and stone-still in the front, he took off toward Atmore.

"Bray," called Elinor, "you drive careful! It's going to rain!"

James Caskey looked up at the sky. The accumulated heat of a whole day of blistering sunshine poured down upon him out of a cloudless expanse of white-blue air.

. . .

Elinor wouldn't tell what she had said to Genevieve Caskey that persuaded that woman to return to Nashville. And since it had been conjectured that Elinor Caskey was the very reason that Genevieve had stayed in Perdido as long as she had, the mystery seemed even deeper. Elinor would only say, "How you think I could have *let* her stay around here after what she did to Grace—that poor child! And she didn't even *break* the lamp!"

James and Elinor went up to Sister's room and stood at the side of Grace's bed. The child still slept soundly.

"That's her way of hiding," said Sister in a low voice. "I do it too."

Back down on the porch Elinor said to James, "I am so sorry. This is my fault."

"Your fault!" cried James. "Not a bit in the world, I—"

"Why you say that?" demanded Mary-Love of her daughter-in-law suspiciously.

"I ought to have seen what Genevieve was capable of. I ought to have got her out of here before what happened today had a chance to happen."

"I wish you had, too," said Mary-Love, "but I will tell you the truth, Elinor. I wouldn't have placed any bets this afternoon when I saw you go into that house, and Sister and Ivey wouldn't have either."

Elinor waved this away. "Two months ago" she said, "I should have picked her up and put her on that train myself."

"James," said Mary-Love, "it is time to talk about divorce."

"No," said Elinor, interrupting. "Talk about it later. No need to talk about it now."

"Why not now?" demanded Mary-Love. "What better time than now, when that child is lying upstairs with belt marks all over her entire body? James has witnesses right here on this porch."

"Wait till this evening," said Elinor. "Wait till Bray and Zaddie get back and we hear Genevieve's been taken care of."

. . .

The road to Atmore went northeast from Perdido, past the sawmills and through a few hundred acres of pine owned by Tom DeBordenave. It skirted the cypress swamp in which the Blackwater River had its marshy source, then emerged into the vast, flat potato and cotton fields of Escambia County. Atmore was the nearest place to catch the train, though it was such a small town that the trains would stop for passengers only if alerted by a signal from the stationmaster.

Bray drove along this road rather more quickly than was his wont. He had been warned that Miss Genevieve had to be at the L & N station by five-thirty in order to get her ticket and prepare the stationmaster to stop the Hummingbird. James Caskey's automobile was a small touring car he had purchased in 1917, a handsome Packard with a metal top and a glass windscreen that Bray drove with much pleasure.

The waning afternoon was still very bright and oppressively warm. Genevieve Caskey sat silently, did not look at Bray or take any apparent notice of the countryside as they passed through it. Zaddie sat apprehensively in the back seat. Bray, Zaddie knew, had been sent on this errand because Elinor had not wanted to allow Genevieve the opportunity during the ride to "explain things" to James; to excuse her temper on account of the heat or the dullness of the town. And Zaddie knew that she had been sent along to prevent Bray's giving in to any temptation offered by Genevieve *not* to see her onto that train to Nashville. But Genevieve might as well have been a dummy in the front window of Berta Hamilton's dress shop, for all the explanations or bribes that she proffered.

By the time they reached the cypress swamp the heat in the automobile had sent Zaddie nearly over into sleep. She sat with her head far back, her eyes closed against the glaring sun in the empty Alabama sky. It burned patterns on her eyelids and she forgot everything but the intense yellow and red that swirled in her brain. But suddenly that yellow and red faded out, and a coolness settled over Zaddie's upturned face. She opened her eyes. A single dark gray cloud had blown across the sun. It wasn't large—probably no bigger than the plot of land on which the Caskey houses were built, Zaddie thought—but it looked very much out of place. Zaddie was certain that five minutes before it hadn't been visible anywhere. And there was another peculiar thing, she realized: solitary clouds were usually much higher in the sky and tended to be wispy, frozen, white. This one was dark, roiling, and it hung low.

She couldn't take her eyes from it. It seemed to be flying directly toward them. Zaddie cowered in the corner of the seat.

Bray had reduced the Packard's speed. Zaddie looked to the front. Not far ahead of them was a great logging truck lumbering slowly along with a full load. It was doubtless headed toward Atmore, where there were two more mills. Long trunks of pine, denuded of branches, protruded far beyond the back of the truck, bobbing up and down with the motion of the vehicle. The longest of these was tied at the end with a red kerchief so that drivers coming up behind could better judge what distance to keep.

Zaddie looked up into the sky again. The cloud had passed over them and gone on ahead.

Then the girl noticed something else strange: the feathery branches of the cypresses in the swamp were not being stirred at all by breezes. They drooped in the heat and were perfectly still; no wind blew the rank grass at the side of the road. Yet just above, that roiling black cloud had fairly flown across the sky.

Not far ahead, the cloud seemed to pause, and as Zaddie watched it began suddenly to pour out rain, as if it were a sponge and God had wrung it. Even Genevieve's head lifted up at this. From the distance—no more than a quarter of a mile—they could see that the rainwater was falling directly onto the road on which they were traveling. Zaddie had never seen anything like it. The sun shone down all around them, and the tops of the trees in the swamp were illuminated in its yellow-white light, yet there was that black solitary cloud spilling pails of rain right onto the highway.

"The devil is beating his wife!" cried Zaddie aloud, as Ivey invariably exclaimed when it rained as the sun was shining.

"Hush, Zaddie!" said Bray. "We got to go right through that."

Just up ahead the road curved a little to the right. It was possible for Bray and Zaddie to see that for a distance of perhaps a hundred yards in front of the truck water from the dark gray cloud was splashing against the macadam of the road.

"That truck don't go faster, we're not gone get you there in time, Miss Genevieve."

Genevieve didn't reply.

The truck ahead, as if in answer to Bray's need for haste, suddenly picked up speed. Zaddie conjectured the driver didn't want to spend any

more time than was necessary driving through that peculiar downfall of rainwater.

Bray didn't either. He kept exact pace.

The logging truck drove into the shadow of the cloud. The water poured down and beat on the felled trees, and in the space of two or three seconds the red kerchief on the end of the longest log was soaked and limp. Great waves of water shot up on either side of the truck.

"Bray!" cried Genevieve suddenly, "Don't!" She meant don't drive the automobile through that uncanny veil of rainwater.

But it was too late to stop. The Packard itself had now driven into the cloud's stormy venue. Never had the passengers of the car seen so great a downpour in so small an area. The water beat against the roof so loudly that they were deafened. Rain gushed through the windows in sheets and instantly soaked Bray and Zaddie and Genevieve to the skin. It poured so heavily against the windscreen that their vision of the road ahead was completely obscured. In an instant all their senses had been occluded by rain: they saw, heard, tasted, felt, and smelled nothing else.

The Packard skidded to the left, and Bray speeded up a little, trying to regain control. He got control again, but the extra speed was taking the car too close to the truck ahead. The long pine trunk with the red kerchief attached to it was suddenly right there. It dropped onto the front of the Packard, skidded up the hood, and smashed through the windscreen.

Genevieve Caskey had no time even to cry out. She saw a flash of red on the other side of the windscreen, but by the time that fugitive color had registered in her mind, the pine trunk had smashed through, and its jagged, resinous tip—sharp as a pointed spear—had been run through her right eye and out the back of her skull. The impact in fact was so great that her entire head was ripped from her body and thrust into the air over the back seat.

Zaddie looked up and saw Genevieve's impaled head bobbing above her, with rain-diluted blood dripping off the still-attached veil.

The pine trunk that had beheaded Genevieve Caskey had also caught against the interior of the automobile's roof, and so, although Bray had lost control of the car again, the Packard was pulled right along behind the logging truck. When they were out from beneath the cloud and onto dry road, Bray put on the brakes and at the same time reached up to pull the pine trunk free of the roof.

Unmindful of the accident behind, the driver of the logging truck did not halt his vehicle. While Genevieve Caskey's trunk and body quivered convulsively on the front seat of the Packard, the speared head was drawn right back out through the hole in the shattered windscreen. There it remained impaled all the way to Atmore where it was discovered by two workers who had been sent around to unload the great logs. Neither of them would touch it, but with a stick they worked it off its spear until it dropped into an old orange crate they had placed on the ground underneath.

"See," said Elinor placidly, when they all learned of it, "I said there wasn't any need to talk about James's divorce."

Chapter 10

The Caskey Jewels

Everybody in Perdido came to Genevieve's funeral. You couldn't have kept them away if James Caskey himself had stood at the church door with a stack of crisp two-dollar bills and given one out to anyone who would turn right around and go back home without trying to sneak a look at the damaged corpse. People didn't see much, however, even after they got inside, because the nature of Genevieve's death demanded a closed coffin.

All the Caskeys sat in the front pew on the left. The women were dressed in black with thick veils. Heavy mourning had gone rather out of fashion in the past couple of years. However, the Caskeys were high people in town, and they all had their funeral dresses ready at the back of a closet. Even Grace had a little crushed hat with a heavy veil attached. Many in town thought this affectation, but the veil in fact was to hide the bruises and welts visible on her face, inflicted by the dead woman two days before.

Genevieve's husband wept. His were the only Caskey tears that morning. Mary-Love and Sister and Elinor didn't even affect sorrow.

In the pew behind Mary-Love sat a man and a woman whom no one had ever seen before. The man, who was tall and ill-favored, coughed a great deal. The woman, who was short and dimpled, wheezed and cooed at a child at her side—a boy about four years old who complained of boredom in an incessant whisper and whistle. No one had to be told that this was Genevieve's family. What little polish Genevieve had exhibited—her clothes, her knowledge of the presidents' middle names—was shown up for the sham it had been once you saw this family. They turned out to be Queenie and Carl Strickland and their son Malcolm. It was with the Stricklands that Genevieve had lived when she was in Nashville.

They had arrived only an hour before the service and they drove away directly from the cemetery. Mary-Love had nodded when she was introduced and Oscar had shaken hands all around. Elinor and Sister had smiled. Everyone had been immensely glad that the Stricklands evaporated before anyone had been driven to the extremity of saying something nice to them about the dead woman.

Genevieve was buried in the town cemetery, which was situated on a piece of high sandy ground west of the workers' houses. This place had fortunately been little affected by the flood. It might be pointed out that the graveyard next to the Bethel Rest Baptist Church in Baptist Bottom had not been so lucky. There, bones and coffin fragments had floated right up to the surface of the earth and were found scattered over several blocks when the waters had receded. Colored women, before they had even stepped inside their own ruined homes, gathered up those bones in croker sacks, and colored men dug a deep grave into which the unidentifiable remains of their parents, wives, children, and friends were once again laid to rest until the next flood should bring them up again.

There were now five graves in the Caskey plot: Elvennia and Roland, James's parents; Randolph, James's brother and Mary-Love's husband; the little girl who had been born Randolph's and James's sister; and now the deep rectangular hole in whose depths Genevieve's severed head and body were casually reunited.

. . .

That afternoon, Mary-Love, Elinor, and Sister changed out of their black and went next door to go through Genevieve's things. Her clothing would be portioned out among the three of them—according to fit, principally. What would fit none of them would be given to Roxie and Ivey. (If Queenie Strickland had remained in Perdido, as everyone had feared she might, she would have received a portion of this wardrobe, though as Mary-Love remarked, referring to Queenie's height, "She'd have to take up all the hems about two feet.") All Genevieve's bags had been removed from the wrecked Packard and brought back to the house. While Elinor and Sister began taking things out of the suitcases, Mary-Love opened the smaller bags. Two contained cosmetics, but Mary-Love couldn't find the one in which Genevieve had kept her jewels.

"They were Elvennia's things," said Mary-Love. "They should have come to me. But Elvennia left them to James—I don't know what she supposed *he* was going to do with them." The truth was, and Sister at least knew it, that Mary-Love hadn't got along with her mother-in-law and Elvennia had left the jewels to her son out of pure spite. "I just hope," said Mary-Love earnestly, "that no one came along and took the bag out of the automobile while it was sitting there on the highway."

“What sort of jewelry did Genevieve have?” Elinor asked, holding up a fine linen skirt to her waist.

“Diamonds, mostly. Not big ones, but lots of them. In good settings, too. Ruby earrings. Emerald earrings. Bracelets. She didn’t wear them a lot, but she always took them with her.”

“Mama, you know why, too,” said Sister. “She was afraid you’d come over and steal ’em!”

“I would have!” cried Mary-Love. “Who do you think took care of Elvennia Caskey when she was so sick? *James* didn’t know what to do with her. And then that old woman had the nerve to go and leave James every damn one of those things!”

Elinor looked up: she had never before heard Mary-Love swear.

“After Elvennia’s funeral,” Mary-Love went on, “I said to James, ‘James, you ought to give those things to me—I have earned them.’ James wouldn’t do it, though. He said it was his mama’s wish that he should get them and he kept ’em. I still haven’t forgiven him. Not for that. I said, ‘James, just let me have the pearls.’ And he wouldn’t even do that.”

“There were pearls?” said Elinor with interest.

“Black pearls,” said Mary-Love. “Most beautiful things you ever saw. Three sets of double strands, fixed so you could wear them all at once. Genevieve could have kept all the diamonds and rubies and sapphires—people around here, after all, don’t wear much but their wedding rings—but I could have worn those pearls anytime, anywhere. At least the smallest strand, I could have worn that one to church. And the thing was, Genevieve didn’t like ’em. She wouldn’t wear ’em ’cause they were black! She carried ’em everywhere, and I was *dying* for those pearls.”

“I like pearls best,” said Elinor quietly.

“Sapphires are my favorite,” said Sister. “But I’ve only got this little baby ring, which I got for being the first grandchild. Mama, maybe you ought to ask James if he knows where that case is.”

Mary-Love had been counting undergarments and dividing them according to quality. She draped five silk underskirts over the back of a chair and said, “I’m gone do just that. We ought to find out what happened to those things—that jewelry is *valuable.”*

Elinor and Sister continued to unpack the dead woman’s things. Mary-Love returned in about ten minutes. She stood in the door with a dumbfounded expression on her face, one hand behind her back.

“Mama,” said Sister without looking up, “did James know where that case was?”

Mary-Love drew her hand around in front of her; she was holding Genevieve’s jewelry case by a handle on its side. The other two women turned to look at Mary-Love. She unfastened the latch and the top fell open. An empty velvet-lined tray dropped to the floor, but absolutely nothing else was in it.

“Mama?” cried Sister. “Where is the jewelry?”

Mary-Love looked at her daughter, then at her daughter-in-law. She deliberately allowed the case to fall to the floor. The jolt unhinged the lid.

“James buried it,” she said after a moment. “He put it all in Genevieve’s coffin.”

. . .

James Caskey had been more disturbed by his wife’s death than anyone knew. He blamed himself for having sent her away—away to her death, as it turned out. He blamed himself for not having driven the Packard to Atmore himself—for then he might have perished in her place.

Oscar pointed out that, following this general line of reasoning, James might more logically blame Elinor and Bray for Genevieve’s death. *Elinor* had sent Genevieve away; *Bray’s* driving had, perhaps, caused the accident. But James didn’t see it that way and took the guilt upon himself. It was for this reason, in partial expiation of his unintentional but fatal sin, that he buried with Genevieve all the jewelry he had inherited from his mother.

He looked surprised, in fact, when Mary-Love confronted him in her vast astonishment and indignation.

“But, Mary-Love,” he protested weakly, “what on earth was *I* going to do with that jewelry? *I* wasn’t gone wear it. And I have given every *speck* of it to Genevieve...”

Mary-Love sighed deeply. She had got James alone. They were the oldest surviving generation of Caskeys, and there were scenes and decisions to which they alone should be privy. For this she wouldn’t have her son or her daughter by her.

“James,” said Mary-Love, “who is in the next room, crying on the bed?”

“Grace,” said James. The child’s sobbing was audible through the wall.

“What is Grace?” asked Mary-Love, staring at her brother-in-law hard in the face. “Is Grace a little girl?”

"She is."

"Well, James, Grace is going to grow up, and when Grace grows up, *she* could have worn that jewelry. That jewelry—which in the first place ought to have come to me—could have gone to Grace. James, you foolish man, you could have divided up that jewelry—it's all Caskey jewelry after all. There would have been some for me and some for Sister and some for Elinor and a whole safety-deposit box full of it for Grace. You could even have sent Queenie Strickland away with a pair of earrings. *Every*body could have benefited."

James looked very troubled. "Mary-Love," he said, "I didn't think of it."

"I know you didn't. And even if you had thought about it you wouldn't have done it! I have a good mind to give Bray a shovel and tell him to go out there and dig Genevieve right out of the ground!"

James Caskey trembled. "Oh, Mary-Love, please don't do that!" he said. But Mary-Love would not give him the satisfaction of a promise not to do that very thing.

Genevieve's grave was not dug up, and Mary-Love forbade the subject of family jewelry to be mentioned again—it was too painful a loss. No one could believe that James Caskey had simply thrown away a caseful of jewels that couldn't be purchased now for any sum less than about thirty-eight thousand dollars. Mary-Love had long been in the habit of purchasing stones for investment and knew their value.

. . .

One morning in October Ivey was in the kitchen preparing the noontime meal. Since Genevieve's death six weeks earlier James and Grace had started having all their meals with Mary-Love and there was very little for Roxie to do all day, so she had taken to sitting out her morning with Ivey and Zaddie in Mary-Love's kitchen. "Oh, look at that!" cried Ivey, leaning over the stove.

"What you see?" asked Roxie.

"I'm looking at the 'tatoes."

"Have they got bugs?"

"Oh, no," said Ivey, "but I never saw the water boil away from 'tatoes so fast. That means it's gone rain today!"

"I don't see no clouds," remarked Roxie, planting both feet firmly upon the floor and leaning far to the left in her straw chair in order to peer

up at the sky through the kitchen window nearest her.

"I'm not never wrong," said Ivey. "Not when it comes to reading 'tatoes."

And Ivey wasn't wrong. The clouds moved in at about noon, and the rain began to fall an hour later. James and Oscar, on their way back to the mill from dinner, were caught out in it, and stopped at the barbershop for shelter and, as long as they were there, haircuts.

At first it hadn't seemed that the rain was going to be heavy, but the intensity of the falling water quickly increased, churning the muddy Perdido, splashing heavy gray sand onto the trunks of the water oaks in the yard, and keeping everyone indoors who hadn't some overwhelming necessity to be out. And since the town wasn't the get-up-and-go kind of place that produced overwhelming necessities in its inhabitants, everyone stayed inside. Out in the pine forests the mill workers took shelter in the logging cabins or beneath a cedar (the tree which provides best shelter in such downpours). Children huddled on back porches and watched the rain with awe, for in Perdido, rain may fall very hard indeed. The grounds around the Caskey houses were awash. Grace and Zaddie sat on the back steps of James Caskey's house and fashioned paper boats which they tossed into a large pool that had formed right in back of the kitchen. There was not a great deal of amusement in this occupation, however, since the rain immediately flattened the boats into soggy masses of pulp.

And at the cemetery, the rain beat down upon Genevieve Caskey's grave. It overturned the pots in which flowers had been placed every day by James Caskey. It tore the petals from the flowers and beat the petals into the earth—as if to deliver James's homage all the way down to his dead wife. In the space of only a little time the mound of earth that covered Genevieve's grave was washed away, and the earth was as flat as it had been when Genevieve was alive and had no thought of this narrow home. But the earth over a grave is loose, and the rain tamped it down. Soon there was a depression in the earth above Genevieve's coffin, a depression that quickly filled with water, and as the water sank down into the earth more water fell from the sky to replenish the pool. This soon sank into the earth as well, and after a time it would have been apparent to anyone who might have been around to look at Genevieve's grave that James Caskey's wife—jewels and all—was not only dead, but also very, very wet.

. . .

Mary-Love and Sister were caught over at the new house where they were measuring the back parlor windows for curtains. Since the house had been completed, Mary-Love's strategy had changed. She had no intention of allowing Oscar to leave her of his own volition, even when that meant continuing to share a house with Elinor. Now that Genevieve was dead, all Mary-Love's antagonism was turned toward her daughter-in-law. The fact that she was able to keep Oscar by her when it was inconvenient and onerous for Oscar to remain, and when there was a large house next door empty and waiting, only showed Elinor that Mary-Love's hold over Oscar was much stronger than her own. Mary-Love had declared that she *could* not allow them to take possession until she was herself satisfied. And satisfaction, Mary-Love contentedly mused to herself, was a thing that might be put off indefinitely. The principal rooms had long been furnished, and now sheets protected these pieces from dust. The place was dark and silent, for the water and electricity had not yet been turned on.

On all four sides of the house, rainwater dropped in a heavy curtain from the high roof, digging neat troughs next to the new flower beds Bray had put in.

"Sister," said Mary-Love, looking apprehensively at the density of water through which they'd have to pass to get home, "do you have something to cover your head?"

"Let's just wait here till it's over," Sister suggested. "It cain't keep up long like this."

Mary-Love acquiesced, for it hardly seemed worth the soaking to return home without cover. The two women finished their measuring, and, after drawing back and carefully folding the sheets which had covered it, seated themselves on the new sofa in the front parlor. Sister opened the draperies here, hung only the week before, and they watched for some sign of slackening off of the downpour.

The sound of the rain was hypnotic, and though it was only October the air was somehow chill. The house, which had been built to let in lots of light and air, seemed gloomy, dark, and inhospitable.

"Mama," said Sister, "maybe we should light a fire..."

"Go ahead," said Mary-Love. "Have you got any matches? Have you got kindling? Have you got a scuttle of coal?"

"No," said Sister.

"Well, then, go right ahead," said Mary-Love, hugging herself tighter.

Almost imperceptibly, during this small exchange, the rain had diminished.

Sister lifted her chin suddenly. “Mama, you hear something?”

“I hear the rain.”

“I mean something in the house,” Sister whispered. “I hear something in the house.”

“I don’t hear anything. You hear the rain splashing on the porch, that’s what you hear.”

“Mama, no, I heard something else.”

Something dropped to the floor in the room directly above them.

“See!” cried Sister, and jumped nearer her mother on the sofa. “There’s somebody up there.”

“No, there’s not!” said Mary-Love firmly, but somehow without complete conviction.

They sat silent, listening. The rain continued to slacken, but it was very far from stopping.

Faintly, they heard a metallic jangle, soft and distant. What was it like? It was like hearing Grace opening her piggy bank on the bed in the next room.

Mary-Love rose, but Sister tried to pull her back.

“Sister,” said her mother sternly, “there is nobody in this house. A squirrel got in. Or maybe a bat. Or the water is leaking through the new roof. Do you know what that roof cost me? I am going upstairs and see and you are coming with me.”

Sister dared not refuse. There was a louder jangle. Mary-Love went out into the hall and started up the stairs. Sister followed, pinching a pleat in the back of Mary-Love’s skirt. “It came from that front bedroom,” said Mary-Love.

They paused on the landing and looked up to the second-floor hallway. All the doors were shut and the hallway itself was dark and dim. At the end, a door inset with squares of stained glass opened onto a narrow porch. The glass glowed richly in vermilion and cobalt and chartreuse, but the light wasn’t strong enough to illuminate the dark carpet on the floor.

There was another jangle.

Sister shuddered and grabbed her mother’s arm.

“Mama, that’s not a bat!”

Mary-Love went resolutely up the stairs. She didn't hesitate, but advanced directly to the end of the hallway, stepping loudly on the carpeted floor in order to give warning to whatever was inside that front room. At the end of the hall she veered suddenly to the left and knocked on the wall next to the door; then she knocked on the door itself.

At first there was silence within, then a soft *thump*, and almost immediately after, another jangle.

Sister, who had dragged along behind, caught her breath in gasps. "Oh, Mama," she pleaded in a whisper, "don't open that door."

Mary-Love turned the knob and pushed open the door of the front room. It slowly swung wide to reveal a square dark chamber with thick curtains over the windows. The suite of furniture here had been the first purchased for the house, and it had lain under sheets longer than any other. The room was painted a dark green. Mary-Love and Sister could see nothing but the outlines of the walnut bed, the dresser, the dresser mirror, the chifforobe, and the chest of drawers. The two women stood absolutely still outside the door listening for another jangle, another thump, watching for some movement in the darkened room.

Something flashed in the corner of the ceiling directly above the chifforobe. Immediately thereafter there was a loud thump. Sister cried out.

"What was it?" demanded Mary-Love, who had been looking in another direction.

"Something on the ceiling! It was on the ceiling!"

"What was it?"

"I don't know! Mama, pull that door closed and let's get out of here."

"We cain't see anything with those curtains closed. Sister, go pull those draperies aside."

"Mama! I'm not going in there! There's something in there!"

"It's a bat," said Mary-Love, "and I'll have to kill it. But I have to be able to see it first."

"Bats don't shine!"

There was another flash, immediately followed by a jangle.

Sister screamed, whirled around, and ran down the hallway.

Mary-Love looked after her daughter for a moment, then walked resolutely across the room to pull open the draperies. "Sister!" she called as she jerked aside the fabric. She turned around but just as she did so, out of the corner of her eye she saw another flash up near the ceiling, and then felt

something heavy and sharp strike the crown of her head. She heard a thud as it hit the floor.

Sister appeared timorously in the doorway. Mary-Love stooped and picked up whatever it was that had struck her.

“Mama, what is it?” asked Sister fearfully.

Mary-Love held it up in the light. “It’s a sapphire ring,” she said. Then after a moment she grimly added, “Your grandmama wore this ring on the third finger of her right hand.”

Sister screamed and pointed up into the corner of the room. Right above the chifforobe, protruding from the plaster of the ceiling, was a narrow glinting band of jewels. It looked as though it were being squeezed out, as potatoes might be extruded through a ricer. The bracelet dangled there an instant, then dropped with a little clatter and jangle onto the top of the chifforobe. Mary-Love went over and picked it up. The bracelet was made up of seven rubies, each surrounded by small round white diamonds. “Elvennia wore this to my wedding,” said Mary-Love. Also on top of the chifforobe was a ring mounted with three quite good-sized diamonds.

“Mama,” whispered Sister, pointing at the bed.

There, on top of the protective sheet, lay a small jumble of jewelry.

“Mama,” said Sister, “this stuff is coming through the *ceiling!”*

“Sister, shhh!” With an unhappy puzzled brow, Mary-Love squeezed the bracelet and two rings in her hand until she felt the facets of the jewels pressing into her flesh. “Sister,” she whispered, “these are all the things that James buried in Genevieve’s coffin.”

Sister bit her lip and began to back toward the door.

“Mama,” she said, almost in tears, “how did it get here, how...”

A brooch of rubies and emeralds dropped from the ceiling onto the center of the bed, adding to the pile there.

It was too much even for Mary-Love. “Get out, get out, get out!” she cried and waved Sister toward the door. Sister turned to run.

The door slammed shut.

Two more rings were flung out of the ceiling and hit Sister on the back of her head. She dropped to her knees and cried out in fear.

Mary-Love stumbled past her daughter to the door and tried to jerk it open. The knob rattled in her hands. The door was locked.

“Mama!” Sister screamed. “It’s locked!”

“No, it’s not!” cried Mary-Love. “No, it’s not, it’s just stuck.”

Sister looked up. Another bracelet popped out from the ceiling, this one from a different place than before, and after a dangling moment it fell draped over the edge of the dresser mirror.

Mary-Love reached down and drew her daughter up. Sister whimpered.

Not knowing what else to do, and more bewildered than she had ever been in her life, Mary-Love pulled open the door of the closet in that room. It was a small door, smaller than any other door in the house, and Mary-Love couldn't remember why it had been constructed so much out of proportion. It swung open. The closet was empty except for a solitary black dress on a hanger. Pinned to the lapel was a black veil, that even as Mary-Love stared at it began to drip a dark mixture of blood and rainwater onto the floor of the closet.

She slammed the closet door shut.

Sister clung to her mother still. Mary-Love pushed her away and went back to the hallway door. Perhaps it *had* been only stuck, swollen with the damp and caught in the jamb. She pulled hard at the knob. Nothing. Mary-Love drew back, biting her lips to keep from crying out in frustration and fear.

The door swung open.

Elinor Caskey stood there in the hallway. She was wearing a green dress that had belonged to Genevieve and the smallest of the three ropes of Genevieve's black pearls clasped around her neck.

"Doors get stuck in wet weather," said Elinor.

Sister, gasping, cried out, "Oh, Elinor, Mama and I were so scared! We thought that somebody had locked us in!"

"We did not," said Mary-Love stiffly, beginning to recover a bit from her fright, and now very much interested in the pearls around Elinor's neck. "We just thought that the door had stuck...like you said."

Sister glanced at her mother, but did not contradict her. "But why are you here? Did you hear us call? Is that why you came over?"

"No," said Elinor with a little smile, "I came over for a different reason. I had a little bit of news."

"What is it?" said Mary-Love quickly.

"Oh, Elinor, cain't it wait for a few minutes? I want to get home!" cried Sister.

“Yes,” said Elinor, “it can wait. But I think we probably ought to gather up all these things.” She went past Mary-Love and Sister to the bed and began to slip the jewels into the pockets of her dress. Mary-Love rushed over and filled her pockets, too.

Chapter 11

Elinor's News

Later that afternoon, when the rain had diminished to just a drip from awnings over the windows, Sister recovered behind the closed door of her room and Mary-Love and Elinor calmly deliberated about Genevieve's recovered jewelry. Strangely enough, no mention was made by either woman of the inexplicable manner of the return of the gems, except by inference. It was decided right off that James could never be allowed to see them *en masse*, for he would be certain to recognize his mother's and his wife's jewelry. Mary-Love would keep the three rings that she liked best, she would hold out two sapphire and diamond bracelets for Sister, and the remainder would be put aside in a safety-deposit box in Mobile for Grace's majority. "By then," said Mary-Love, "James may be dead, or he may have lost his memory and we won't have a problem about giving things to Grace. I suppose," she went on delicately, "that you ought to keep the pearls, Elinor."

"I suppose I will," Elinor replied.

Of all the jewelry that had been buried in Genevieve's casket, only the black pearls had not materialized from the ceiling of the upper room of the new house, and even in her great fear and greater wonder, Mary-Love's iron-trap mind had closed on that fact. But she had seen one strand of the pearls around Elinor's neck, and she more than suspected that the other two strands were in Elinor's possession. Mary-Love of course had wanted those pearls for herself—they were the most valuable of all, as well as the most beautiful and useful of the jewels—but Mary-Love, even as she conveniently suppressed thoughts about the inexplicable manner of the return of the jewels, yet credited the *fact* of their recovery somehow to Elinor. And if Elinor had brought the jewels—*Sister, don't ask how, it won't do for us to know*—why then, Elinor ought to have her pick of the lot.

After this conference, Mary-Love never mentioned what she had seen in the house next door. She had no wish to dig out its meaning. When Sister came to her and in whispers demanded to know what it was all about and wanted five reasons why that house should not be burned to the ground this very minute, Mary-Love said only, "Sister, we got Elvennia's things back

and that's all I care about. But I tell you what I'm gone do, I'm gone send Bray over there first thing tomorrow with a broom and tell him to kill all those bats that are up there in that room."

"Bats!" cried Sister, so angered by her mother's stubborn obtuseness that she couldn't bring herself to speak another civil word and walked right out of the room.

Though Mary-Love perhaps convinced herself that there were bats in the front bedroom of the house next door, she did not return to make certain that all the jewelry had been gathered up, or to see if it had really been blood dripping from the dress and veil hanging in the closet.

. . .

That evening, after supper, the three women went out and sat on the side porch, watched the moon rise, and waited for Oscar to return from the town council meeting.

"Elinor!" blurted Sister suddenly. "This afternoon you said you had some news, but you never told us what it was. I forgot all about it."

"I did too," said Mary-Love. It was apparent she had not, but had only been reluctant to seem interested or curious.

"I went to see Dr. Benquith this afternoon. It looks as if I'm pregnant," said Elinor calmly.

Mary-Love was for once unrestrained. She got up from the swing and went over and hugged Elinor close. Sister wasn't far behind.

"Oh, Elinor!" cried Mary-Love. "You have just made me a happy woman! You are gone give me a grandchild!"

"Go tell James," Sister urged. "I see his lights are on. James will be so happy!"

"No," said Elinor, "I have to tell Oscar first."

"You told *us,"* argued Sister.

"That's different," said Mary-Love. "You and I are women. James is a man. Elinor is right. James has no business finding out about it before Oscar."

"Could you tell Grace? She's a girl."

Mary-Love shook her head. "Sister, I am sometimes surprised at what you do not know. Women find things out first, then they tell the men—otherwise the men wouldn't find out *anything*—then the servants find out, and the children last of all. And sometimes children don't *ever* find things out, even after they've grown up. There are secrets that *die*. Sister, I

shouldn't have to be telling you any of this. These are things you should *know!"*

"Well, I don't," said Sister sullenly. "I guess that's why I'm never gone get married."

"Don't say that," said Mary-Love with some severity. "When you get ready..."

Oscar's automobile pulled up before the house.

"You want us to go inside?" Mary-Love whispered, but Elinor shook her head no.

"All I'm going to do is tell him," said Elinor easily. "There's no reason for you not to be here."

Oscar came up onto the front porch and was about to go inside the house, but Elinor called, "Oscar, we're out here!"

Oscar came around. "Hey y'all," he said, "sure is a pretty night. All the clouds cleared away."

"Oscar," said Elinor without preamble, "I'm going to have a baby."

Oscar stood stock-still, then he grinned. "Elinor, I'm so happy. But what I want to know is, is it gone be a boy or a girl?"

"You'll take whatever you get," said Mary-Love.

"Which do you want?" asked Sister.

"I want a girl," said Oscar, sitting down and putting his arm around his wife's shoulder.

"Well, Oscar, you are in luck today, because that's what it's going to be." Elinor stated this not as a matter of belief or conjecture, but rather as if it had been a matter of choice, just as she might have said, *I'm going to buy a pink dress,* rather than *I'm going to get a blue one.*

"How you know?" demanded Sister, who that day had come to feel that there was entirely too much about life she did not understand.

"Shhh!" said Mary-Love. "I think it'll be wonderful to have a little girl baby in the house!"

Elinor's announcement completely overshadowed the little agenda of news that Oscar brought with him from the town council meeting, and they didn't hear it until the next morning at breakfast. A third man was about to be added to the town police force; the Palafox Street merchants had agreed to bear half the expense of new concrete sidewalks; and finally, an engineer from Montgomery, whose name was Early Haskew, had put up at the Osceola the previous afternoon, had introduced himself to the town council

(“a real nice man, and good looking,” remarked Oscar, hardly satisfying his mother’s desire for a detailed description), and would today begin his survey of Perdido.

“Surveying for what?” asked Sister.

“Well, for the levee of course,” said Oscar. Elinor put down her fork with a clatter.

. . .

Oscar knew nothing about pregnancy except that it required nine months. So he calculated the birth of his daughter nine months from the day Elinor told him he was going to be a father, as if she had been impregnated the night before and somehow knew it. He was overjoyed to learn that he would have to wait only seven months—his daughter (of *that* he was certain, for Elinor had said it) would be born in May.

That night, while Elinor was undressing and Oscar was rising from his prayers at the side of the bed, he said, “Elinor, I think you ought to give up the school.”

“I won’t do it,” returned Elinor.

“You’re pregnant!”

“Oscar,” she said, “do you think that I want to sit in this house all day long with Miss Mary-Love perched on one shoulder and Sister perching on the other?”

“No,” he admitted, “I suspect you wouldn’t be partial to that.”

“Oscar,” said Elinor, going over and drawing back the curtain so that the moon could shine into the room, “it is time we moved into our new house.” She raised the screen and leaned out the window. Looking to her left, she could see the house that had been built for her: large, square, and stolid, rising from a pitted lake of shining sand, with the dark pine forest sighing softly behind it.

“Oscar,” Elinor went on, “that house was our wedding present. We have been married for six months and we are still living in the room you had as a little boy. Every time I hang up a dress I see your old toys in the back of the closet—they’re still there, and I don’t have anywhere to put my shoes! The house next door has sixteen rooms and not a single person in any one of them.” She got into bed.

“Mama will be lonesome when we go,” Oscar ventured.

“Mama will have Sister,” snapped Elinor. *“Mama* will be able to look out her window—without even getting out of her bed—and see if we are up

and stirring in the morning. *Mama* can lean out the back door and shake her mop in my face. Oscar, we're not going to the end of the earth. We're moving thirty yards away. And what you got to remember is, I'm going to have a baby. We're going to need that house."

"I know it," said Oscar uncomfortably. "And I'll talk to Mama." A thought suddenly occurred to him. He turned on his pillow and looked into his wife's face. "Elinor, let me ask you something. Did you get pregnant just so we could move out of this house?"

"I would do *anything* to get you out of this house, Oscar. I would go to any length," replied Elinor, then turned over and went to sleep.

Oscar talked to Mary-Love, but she wouldn't hear of his leaving her. Mary-Love objected that the house wasn't furnished yet; Mary-Love declared that there were bats upstairs and Bray hadn't been able to kill them; Mary-Love pointed out that before Oscar and Elinor moved into the house, she'd have to find them at least two colored women to work there, and every decent colored woman in Perdido was already taken. Elinor was pregnant and shouldn't have to run a house all by herself, going up and down stairs all day, worrying about linens and cushions. And to make certain that Elinor and Oscar did not move one day when she was out of the house for a few hours—in remembrance and imitation of the circumstances of their wedding—Mary-Love made surreptitious visits to the water board and the Alabama Gas and Power Company and forced them to promise not to turn on the water, electricity, and gas before she gave her written consent.

Oscar gave in. "I cain't fight Mama," he told his wife with a despairing sigh. "She's always got one more argument than I have. And Lord, Elinor, the only thing she wants in this world is to take care of you while you are pregnant! I don't know why you don't sit back and enjoy it!"

"There is not *room* to sit back in this house, we are so cramped!"

"There is room enough here," said Oscar mildly. "Elinor, we will go next door just as soon as our little girl is born. Listen, you know that little room behind the kitchen?"

"I know the one you mean."

"I was thinking we might put up a cot in there and make Zaddie sleep there all the time. Keep you company, keep care of our little girl. Zaddie loves you to death, and I know she'd like nothing more in the world than to come live with us."

This was a large concession. If that innocent and salutary arrangement came to pass, Zaddie Sapp would be the only black in the entire length and breadth of Baldwin County—the largest, though not the most populous county in the entire state—to live in a white household.

"I think that's a good idea," said Elinor with a grimace, "but, Oscar, let me tell you something. I'm not won over. I'm not going to let you buy me off with promises about Zaddie's sleeping arrangements. I think we ought to go next door, and I think we ought to go next door tonight!"

"There aren't even any sheets on the bed!"

"I will go to Caroline DeBordenave and *borrow* them if I have to!" cried Elinor.

"We cain't do that," said Oscar.

"You can't do it," Elinor corrected. "You can't go against Miss Mary-Love. That's all."

"Then *you* talk to her," said Oscar. "You stand up to her."

"It's not my place," said Elinor. "I refuse to be accused for the rest of my life of taking you away from Miss Mary-Love."

So Elinor and Oscar remained in Mary-Love Caskey's house for the entire term of Elinor's pregnancy. Despite Mary-Love's remonstrances, Elinor still rowed Bray's little green boat to the school every morning with Grace perched in the prow, and she didn't miss a day for sickness. Mary-Love and Sister knitted baby clothes and went to Mobile to pick out a set of nursery furniture. Ominously, however, when this suite was delivered, Mary-Love had it placed not next door, but in a spare bedroom of her own home. When Oscar returned from the mill that afternoon, Elinor took him upstairs, opened the door of that room, and pointed at the wicker bassinet that was still wrapped in brown paper—but she didn't say a word.

"When the time comes," Oscar promised in a low voice, "I will put down my foot."

The time came sooner than anyone expected. After school, on the twenty-first day of March, Grace Caskey stood on the mooring dock while Elinor tied the boat to the iron ring of the outermost piling. Grace gave Elinor a hand and helped her up onto the weathered pine planks of the dock. This was an awkward operation on account of Elinor's extended belly. Elinor put a hand to her forehead, closed her eyes for a moment, and said, "Grace, will you do something for me?"

Grace said, "Yes, ma'am."

Elinor said, “Go tell Roxie to fetch the doctor. Then run over to Miss Mary-Love’s and have Ivey turn down my bed.”

Grace hesitated. “Are you sick?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Grace,” said Elinor with a weak smile, “I am about to have my little girl!”

Grace ran off, as excited as she had been on the day that Miss Elinor got married.

. . .

Two hours later, Elinor Caskey—with Sister holding her left hand and Ivey Sapp holding her right and Mary-Love mopping her brow—was delivered of a three-pound little girl. The child was so small that for two months she had to be carried around the house in the hollow of a feather pillow. By Elinor’s decree and Oscar’s consent, she was to be called Miriam Dammert Caskey.

Chapter 12

The Hostage

Miriam didn't look like Elinor; she took after Oscar and all the other Caskeys. This fact alone would have endeared her to Mary-Love, even had Miriam not been the first of her grandchildren. She had the Caskey hair, hair that was no color at all, and the Caskey nose, which wasn't quite straight but certainly couldn't have been said to be hooked or bulbous or too little or too extreme in its formation or size.

Miriam had been born on Monday. Zaddie took a note to Miz Digman's house that evening to say Elinor wouldn't be at school the following morning, but hoped to return on Wednesday. And Elinor did return on Wednesday, though Mary-Love cried in protest, "You are leaving your two-day-old baby alone!"

"Not exactly alone," remarked Elinor. "In this house there are you and Sister here and Ivey. Next door are Zaddie and Roxie. If the five of you can't handle it, then call up Oscar—he'll be coming by here five times to look in on her, anyway."

"I would have thought," said Mary-Love, "that you would have been going to give up your class."

"But I'm not, though," said Elinor. "What would Miz Digman think of me! What would my Indians think!"

"But poor old Miriam..." cried Mary-Love.

"Miriam is two days old, like you said," Elinor pointed out. "She doesn't know me from the man in the moon. Sister, you go in my room and open my closet door and put on one of my dresses—you pretend you're me when you're leaning over the crib."

In the months following Miriam's birth, Elinor did not press her husband in the matter of his promise. Miriam was tiny—was there ever a child who was tinier?—and wanted much attention on account of her size and general frailty. The baby had very white skin beneath which, on all parts of her body, you could see a delicate tracing of blue veins. She scarcely ever seemed to cry, and Ivey said confidingly of this phenomenon to Roxie, "That child don't have enough breath to go around—breathe and cry too. That child just cain't do it, and if she sees the other side of two

years of age, why I will toss her directly across the Perdido River and let Bray catch her on the other side!" Roxie tended to agree.

Four rolled blankets were placed in the bassinet in the bedroom that lay between Oscar and Elinor's room and Sister's. Within that rectangle of security lay Miriam all night long, quiet and unmoving, and Sister—who had specially asked for the privilege of administering the two o'clock feeding—often had to wake the baby for it. But sometimes, turning on a soft lamp in the corner and creeping over to the bassinet, Sister would find the little girl looking up at her with a tiny smile, as if saying, Sister said, *Oh, Sister, you cain't sneak up on me!*

Miriam grew quickly and increased in strength. Sister and Mary-Love, who were there at the house all day long while Elinor was at the school, quickly began to think of the baby as their own and to resent, the least little bit, Elinor's hour or so with her in the late afternoon. They would snatch Miriam away from Oscar, whom they considered insufficiently schooled in the ways of handling undersized infants.

"Lord, Mama," Oscar protested, "I ought to know as much about it as Sister!"

"You don't!" cried Sister. "Oscar, I can just see you dropping that child head-first on the floorboards..."

Oscar thought himself happy. He had a baby girl who was very pretty and very well behaved—he told James he thought they could have taken Miriam to morning service and she wouldn't have made a peep. And Elinor seemed to be satisfied with the arrangement—she no longer thought of moving into the house next door, or if she thought about it, she no longer mentioned it. Miriam had changed all that, Oscar was sure. Elinor needed Mary-Love and Sister to take care of the baby while she was teaching. "I know Elinor loves Miriam to the bottom of her toes," he confided to James, "but I'm not so sure Elinor wants to take care of Miriam twenty-four hours a day. And that's *exactly* what Mama and Sister want to do!"

Oscar, however, had erred in this interpretation. He found it out on the Sunday that Miriam was christened. It was the middle of May and the weather was hot and the Caskeys were sweltering in their pew. Mary-Love leaned across Sister every two minutes, and with her handkerchief wiped the perspiration from Miriam's tiny brow as she lay quietly in Elinor's arms. Between the pastoral prayer and the sermon Oscar and Elinor and Miriam were called to the front of the church and the service of baptism

was read over Miriam Dammert Caskey. The preacher lifted the mahogany cover of the silver baptism basin—a gift of Elvennia Caskey many years before—and was about to dip her fingers into the water to sprinkle the infant's head, when she stopped in consternation.

Oscar looked down into the basin. The water that filled it was muddy and red.

The preacher whispered: "Oscar, I don't know how..."

"Go ahead!" Elinor said with a smile. "It's just old Perdido water."

The preacher gingerly dipped her fingers in the water and flicked it over Miriam's brow. The child smiled up at her mother.

After the service the family all had dinner together at Mary-Love's, and in honor of the occasion everyone remained in his Sunday clothes. As the ham was going around in one direction and a plate of ground-beef patties in the other, Elinor said: "School is over in one week and two days."

"I know you must be glad," said James. "I know it's hot up there in that classroom—you got the sun shining in all afternoon long."

"That'll be on Tuesday week," went on Elinor, unmindful of the interruption. "And I got to be there on Wednesday to check in books. So Thursday week," she said, looking up and all around the table, "Oscar and Miriam and I will be moving in the new house..."

Hell broke loose. Sister was so upset that she didn't eat another bite. Mary-Love in her distress attacked her plate and consumed in a few moments twice what she normally would have eaten in the course of an entire day. Oscar pleaded, "Oh, y'all, please, let's talk about this later." James sent Grace out of the room. Ivey and Roxie stood listening on the other side of the kitchen door.

"I'm not going to say a word about it," said Elinor. "There is nothing to talk about. That house next door is Oscar's and mine and we intend to move into it. That house was our wedding present and it is just *sitting there* with sheets all over the furniture!"

"Oh, who *cares* about that old place!" exclaimed Mary-Love, though she spoke of the largest and most expensively built house in the whole town. "We're talking about Miriam! You cain't carry that child over there!"

"Why not?" demanded Elinor.

"Who's gone take care of her?" wailed Sister.

"I intend to," snapped Elinor.

“You don’t know how!” cried Mary-Love. “Oscar, I forbid you to move your child out of this house. Miriam would shrivel up and die!”

Miriam lay in a small crib in the adjoining room. Mary-Love rose precipitately and ran and picked the child up, comforting her and promising in whispers that she would never leave her grandmother. Sister got up too and caressed the baby as Mary-Love rocked it in her arms.

“Every one of you can go on about this for as long as you want,” said Elinor. “But Oscar and I are going to leave this house.”

“Why?” cried Mary-Love. “Why do you want to leave this house?”

“Because I can’t stand it here!” said Elinor savagely from the table. “I am sick to my death of looking out the window every morning and seeing that great big house next door that’s supposed to be mine, except you keep it locked and you hide the keys from me! I am sick to death of tripping over you and Sister every time I want to look at my own child! I am sick to death of having my closets filled with dead people’s clothes! I am sick of having to report every little movement I make—where I’m going, what I’m doing, and who I’m doing it with. It’ll be bad enough to live right next door, with you and Sister waltzing in at every hour of the day, but at least there I can put hooks up so that you have to knock. Oscar is my husband, and Miriam is my baby, that is our house! And that is the reason Oscar and I are moving out!”

“Elinor,” said Oscar, in despair.

“Oscar,” said Mary-Love wildly, “you are not leaving this house with this darling child! You are not gone let that woman have the care and feeding of this precious infant!”

“Mama, if Elinor feels—”

“Elinor doesn’t feel!” cried Mary-Love, swinging the baby back and forth in her arms with such energy that Sister placed herself to catch Miriam should she be accidentally hurled out of that embrace. “That’s the whole point. She’s not a mother to this child! Sister and I are! You will be ruining this child if you take her away from us!”

Elinor sat still with an expression of disgust on her face. She pushed away her plate. “Ivey,” she called out, “come on in here and clear off—nobody feels like eating any more!”

Ivey came in with Zaddie behind her to clear off the table. In normal circumstances no one would have said a word before the servants—even though everyone was certain that those in the kitchen had heard every word

—but these were not normal circumstances, and Mary-Love went on above the clatter of plates and silverware and glasses. “Oscar,” she said in a low, awful voice, “I forbid you to leave this house with Miriam.”

“Mama,” said Oscar plaintively, “you promised Elinor and I could leave as soon as Miriam was born. And ’cause Miriam was so puny, Elinor was sweet enough—”

Here Mary-Love snorted in contempt.

“—to stay on for a few months and let you help take care of her. But now school’s over and Elinor’s gone be home all the time.”

“What about the fall?” demanded Mary-Love. “What’s gone happen in September? Is Elinor gone hang Miriam on a hook on the porch while she’s down at the school?”

“I’m not going back to teaching,” said Elinor quietly. “Edna McGhee doesn’t like Tallahassee after all. I told her she could have the fourth grade back.”

“Doesn’t matter!” cried Mary-Love desperately. “You’re not gone have this child!”

“We are leaving this house,” said Elinor calmly.

Mary-Love handed the infant to Sister, who held Miriam close to her breast as if to protect her from the violence of Mary-Love’s and Elinor’s words. Mary-Love advanced to the table and stood behind her chair, grasping the back with white-knuckled fingers. “Go on then,” cried Mary-Love, “go next door with my blessing. I’ll give you the keys today. Sister, go get the keys! I’ll give you those keys this very minute and you can move over there this afternoon. I’ll give you candles and a kerosene lamp and Zaddie will fetch you water. Tomorrow, I’ll have the electricity and water and gas turned on. Ivey will carry over your clothes.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Elinor coldly.

“Oh, thank you, Mama—” Oscar began.

“Miriam stays here,” said Mary-Love decisively.

There was a moment of terrible silence.

“Mary-Love—” began James Caskey in a choked whisper.

She cut him off. “You get the house, Elinor—that’s what you want. I get that baby—that’s what I want.”

“Mama, you cain’t—”

“Oscar, you be quiet!” said Mary-Love. “What has this got to do with you, I’d like to know!”

“Well, for one thing, Miriam is my little girl!”

“Miriam belongs to Sister and me!”

Sister brought the keys to the new house. She was still holding the baby. Miriam waved her arms about for attention. Sister buried her nose against the baby’s neck and rubbed it there until Miriam laughed aloud.

Ivey came back in and was taking away the last few glasses from the center of the table. “Ivey,” said Elinor, “as soon as you’re done, go upstairs and start packing my things, would you please?”

“Be glad to, Miss Elinor,” said Ivey in a low voice, not looking at anyone else in the room.

Mary-Love smiled triumphantly.

Oscar, shocked, turned to his wife. “Elinor, how can you—”

“Be quiet, Oscar. We are not remaining in this house another night. Not one more night.”

“But what about Miriam?”

“James,” said Elinor. “I want to know if I can borrow Roxie for a while.”

“Ohhh,” said James, “Elinor, I wish you would. Grace and I eat over here all the time anyway. I pay Roxie five dollars a week for sitting down ten hours a day at the kitchen table. She has memorized fourteen chapters of the book of Job!”

Oscar was staring stuporously at his child, cradled in Sister’s arms. Sister had backed away from the table and stood actually in the next room, though visible to all through the opened doors.

“Elinor, are we just gone *leave* her here, while we go next door?”

Elinor folded her napkin and rose from the table. “Oscar,” she said, “we have got a lot of packing to do, and you should change out of those clothes.”

“But our little girl...” Though no one interrupted him, Oscar broke off when a shaft of enlightenment, bright as the sun outside, suddenly pierced his brain. The entire business had been planned. Elinor had seen that the only way to get him out of Mary-Love’s house was to replace him with something that Mary-Love loved even more. And for that reason, Miriam had been born. Elinor had given birth not to a daughter so much as to a hostage. And Miriam had been left at home all day so that Mary-Love and Sister might become attached to her. And Elinor’s feint of going away with Oscar and her daughter had been only that—a feint. She had intended from

the first to offer up Miriam—to toss the infant off the back of the sleigh to the ravening wolves so that he and she might escape whole.

Oscar looked around the table. No one else understood—not even Mary-Love and Sister. He caught his wife's eye, and what he saw there made him realize that he was right—and that she understood that he understood.

"Oscar," she said quietly, "are you ready to start packing?"

He stood from the table, and dropped his napkin upon the seat of his chair. Mary-Love and Sister stood in the doorway, both with their hands upon his daughter, rocking her back and forth, and cooing.

Within the hour he and Elinor were gone, having abandoned their daughter without another word.

II: The Levee

Chapter 13

The Engineer

"Oh, Lord, protect us from flood, fire, maddened animals, and runaway Negroes."

That was Mary-Love Caskey's prayer before every meal, learned from her mother who had hidden silver, slaves, and chickens from the rapacity of starving Yankee marauders. But in these days, safety from a fourth danger was silently appended both in her own mind and in Sister's: *Oh, Lord, protect us from Elinor Dammert Caskey.*

Elinor, after all, was a woman to be feared. Into the well-regulated lives of the Caskeys of Perdido, Alabama, she had brought trouble and surprise. Having mysteriously appeared in the Osceola Hotel at the height of the great flood of 1919, she had cast a spell first over James Caskey—Mary-Love's brother-in-law—and then over Oscar, Mary-Love's son. She had married Oscar much against Mary-Love's desire. Elinor had hair that was the muddy red color of the Perdido River, but no family connections or financial portion. And in the end, she had taken Oscar away from Mary-Love, carried him to the house next door, and left her own child in payment for the right to take departure. *That*, Mary-Love considered, only showed Elinor to be a woman for whom no sacrifice was too great on the field of battle. She was a formidable adversary to Mary-Love, who had never before had anyone question her sovereignty.

If Mary-Love and Sister had been protective of the infant Miriam before, how close did they hold her now! Two weeks had passed since Elinor and Oscar had moved out, and as yet Elinor had shown no sign of repenting of her bargain. Mary-Love was fifty-one and would never have another child of her own. Sister was just under thirty, and had no prospects of marriage; it was unlikely she would possess a daughter other than the one her sister-in-law had given up to her. They wouldn't leave the child alone for an instant, for fear that Elinor—watching from behind one of the newly hung curtains of her back parlor—would rush over, swoop the child into her arms, and carry her back in sneaking triumph. Neither of these women intended to relinquish Miriam even though all the world and the law should demand it of them.

Mary-Love and Sister, in the beginning, had steeled themselves against what they imagined would be constant visits from Elinor. They were certain she would make suggestions for a better way to do this or that for the child, would burst into tears and beg to have Miriam for only an hour every morning, would moon over her daughter's crib, and would endlessly seek opportunities to snatch her away. But Elinor did none of those things. In fact, Elinor never came to see her daughter at all. She rocked placidly on the front porch of her new house, and corrected the pronunciation of Zaddie Sapp, who sat at her feet with a sixth-grade reader. Elinor nodded politely to Sister and Mary-Love when she saw them, or at least when it was impossible to pretend that she had *not* seen them, but she never asked to see the child. Mary-Love and Sister—who had never before been so united upon any issue whatsoever—conferred and tried to puzzle out whether Elinor ought to be trusted or not. They decided that, for safety's sake, her aloof attitude should be considered a tactic to put them off their guard. So their vigilance was maintained.

On Sundays, Mary-Love and Sister took turns staying home with the child during morning service. One or the other would sit in the same pew with Elinor, nod politely to her, and speak if the occasion allowed. But then Mary-Love suggested, as a taunt to Elinor, that she and Sister should *both* attend church. Elinor, seeing them there together, would realize that little Miriam was alone, protected only by Ivey Sapp—but she would not be able to escape the service and fetch her daughter out. Sister and Mary-Love were always careful never to leave the house on Sunday morning until they had seen Oscar and Elinor drive off to the church together, for fear that one day Elinor might remain behind and purloin her daughter before the first hymn had been sung.

One Sunday, however, Mary-Love and Sister both happened to be away from the front window when Oscar drove off. They assumed that Elinor had gone with him. At church they discovered, to their terrible dismay, that Elinor had remained at home, to tend Zaddie through the mumps. Their voices trembled through the hymns, they heard not a word of the sermon, they forgot to rise when they ought to have risen, and remained standing when they ought to have sat down again. They rushed home, and discovered Miriam sound asleep in the crib that was kept on the side porch. Ivey Sapp crooned a wordless song above her. Next door, Elinor Caskey sat on her front porch with the Mobile *Register*. Nothing in the world could

have been easier than for Elinor to walk right across and up onto the porch, hold off Ivey with a stern word, lift Miriam out of her crib, and march straight back home with her. But Elinor had done no such thing.

Elinor, Sister and Mary-Love concluded, did not want her daughter back at all.

Convinced as they were that Elinor had in truth given up her daughter —though at a considerable loss to understand how she could have done such a thing—Sister and Mary-Love began to wonder what Oscar thought of the business. Oscar *did* sometimes visit his mother and sister, though he never took meals with them, and, as Sister pointed out, he never entered the house, but confined his visits to the side porch. Sometimes in the late afternoon, if he saw them on the porch, he'd come across and sit in the swing for a few minutes. He'd speak his greeting to his sister and his mother, then would lean over the crib and say, "How you, Miriam?" quite as if he expected the six-month-old child to answer him in kind. He didn't seem particularly interested in his daughter, and would merely nod and give a little smile if Sister described some surprisingly advanced or fascinatingly comical event in Miriam's development. And soon taking his leave with the excuse that Elinor would be wondering where he was and what he was doing, he would say, "So long, Mama. Bye-bye, Sister. See you later, Miriam." By the repetition of this pattern, which served only to emphasize the slightness of the hold their company and proximity held over him, Sister and Mary-Love came to understand that in gaining Miriam and jettisoning Elinor, they had also lost Oscar.

. . .

In the great new house on the town line Oscar and Elinor rattled about in their sixteen rooms. In the evening, he and Elinor sat down at the breakfast room table and ate the cold remainder of that afternoon's dinner. The kitchen door was propped open so that Zaddie, who stood at the counter and ate her own identical meal, should not feel lonely. Every other evening, when the bill changed, Oscar and Elinor went to the Ritz. Even though admission was only five cents, they always gave Zaddie a quarter to get into the colored balcony, whether she went or not. When they got home, they sat out in one of the four swings on the upstairs sleeping porch. In a bit, as Oscar desultorily rocked the swing with the toe of one shoe, Elinor would turn and lay her head in his lap. Together they would stare through the screen at the moonlit Perdido, flowing almost silently behind the house.

And if Oscar talked at all, it was of his work, or of the valiant progress of the water oaks—which, after only two years of growth, were now nearly thirty feet high—or of what gossip he had heard related that morning at the barber shop.

But he never mentioned their daughter, though the window of Miriam's room was visible from where they rocked in the swing, and that window was sometimes lighted, and Mary-Love or Sister sometimes briefly appeared moving purposefully about, tending to the daughter who was as lost to him as if she had been stolen by gypsies or drowned in the river.

Elinor was again expecting a child, but it seemed to Oscar that this pregnancy was much slower than the first. His wife's belly seemed to swell less—and later in her term—and he urged her to visit Dr. Benquith. Elinor did so and returned with the report that all was well. However, she acceded to Oscar's wish that she not return to teach that fall, and rather to Oscar's surprise, Elinor seemed content to remain all day in the house. Also, for propriety's sake and for Oscar's ease of mind, she gave up her morning swims in the Perdido. Nevertheless, despite his wife's precautions and Dr. Benquith's reassurances, Oscar remained unsatisfied and uneasy.

. . .

Mary-Love Caskey would have liked Perdido to acknowledge that she had won the battle with her daughter-in-law. And how could Perdido *not* think so, when Mary-Love was in possession of the spoils? Even if baby Miriam had been won at the expense of her son's affection, Oscar was bound to have gone off somewhere, with someone, sooner or later. Besides, what son ever remained permanently estranged from his mother? There was no question in Mary-Love's mind but that Oscar would someday return to her, and then her conquest of Elinor Caskey would be sweet and complete indeed!

But Perdido, to Mary-Love's consternation, didn't see things that way at all. What Perdido saw was that when the smoke had cleared, Elinor Caskey was sitting at the top of the hill, waving an untattered and unbloodied flag. She had given up her only child, but from all appearances she didn't seem to care one way or the other.

And more importantly, Elinor Caskey wasn't acting like a defeated woman. If she never paid visits to her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law and her abandoned daughter, in public she was never anything other than pleasant and friendly to them. Nothing in her tone savored of irony or

sarcasm or the heaping-on of burning coals; she was never heard to speak a word against either Mary-Love or Sister. Nor had she sought to suborn Caroline DeBordenave or Manda Turk into rebellion against Mary-Love by establishing an intimacy either with the women themselves or with their daughters.

Elinor never objected to Oscar's visits to his mother's house, and never made him feel guilty about having gone. She sent Zaddie over with boxes of peaches and bottles of blackberry nectar she had put up herself. But she never once set foot in Mary-Love's house and never asked after her daughter's health and never invited Mary-Love or Sister over to see what the new house looked like all furnished and decorated.

Thus, once convinced that there was to be no attempt to reappropriate Miriam, Mary-Love decided that Elinor had not been sufficiently humbled, and began to look about for a way to crush her daughter-in-law.

. . .

A year and a half before, on the day after Elinor had announced her first pregnancy, there had arrived in Perdido a man called Early Haskew. He was thirty years of age, with brown hair and brown eyes and a thick brown mustache. He had a sunburned complexion, strong arms and long legs, and a wardrobe that seemed to consist entirely of khaki trousers and white shirts. He had gone to school at the University of Alabama, and had been superficially wounded on the bank of the Marne. And he had learned, during his tenure in France, everything there was to know about earthworks. Earth, in fact, seemed to pervade his consciousness, and he was never really comfortable except with both his large feet firmly planted on solid ground. There seemed, moreover, always to be earth beneath his fingernails and in the creases of his sunburned skin; but no one looking at him ever thought this attributable to a relaxation of personal hygiene. The dirt seemed only to be a part of the man, and wholly unobjectionable. He was an engineer, and he had come to Perdido to see whether it might be possible to protect the town from future flooding by the construction of a series of levees along the banks of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers.

With the help of two surveying students from Auburn Polytechnic, Early Haskew plotted out the town, plumbed the depths of the rivers, measured heights above sea level, examined records at the town hall, and noted the fading high-water marks left by the flood of 1919. He talked with the foremen of the mills who used the rivers for the transport of logs, took

photographs of the sections of town that lay near the banks of the rivers, dispatched letters of enquiry to engineers in Natchez and New Orleans, and drew a salary that was, unbeknownst to any but the members of the town council, paid entirely by James Caskey. At the end of eight weeks, during which he seemed to be everywhere, with his maps, instruments, notebooks, cameras, pencils, and assistants, Early Haskew disappeared. He had promised detailed plans within three months, but James Caskey received a letter a short time after his departure, announcing his inability to meet that deadline, owing to some army work required of him over at Camp Rucca. Early Haskew was still in the reserves.

But now he was finished with the reserves, and was returning to Perdido with the intention of completing his plans as quickly as possible. Who knew how soon the waters might rise again?

Early Haskew had lived with his mother in a tiny town called Pine Cone, on the edge of the Alabama Wiregrass area. She had died recently, and Early had seen no necessity of returning to Pine Cone. He sold his mother's house, and wrote to James Caskey asking if the millowner would be so kind as to find him a place to live. Early hoped not only to provide the plans but to supervise the building of the levee—if the town council were pleased to judge him fit for the work—so he might be in town for as long as two years. And two years was enough time to justify the purchase of a house.

James Caskey mentioned this news at Mary-Love's one evening. James had thought it a piece of information of interest, but of not much importance, so he was startled by the vehemence with which Mary-Love Caskey seized upon it.

"Oh, James," she cried, "don't you let that man buy a house!"

"Why not?" said James mildly. "If he wants it, and he has the money?"

"Wasting his money!" said Mary-Love.

"Well, what do you want the man to do, Mama?" asked Sister, who was sitting sideways in her chair at the table and bouncing Miriam up and down on her knee while nine-year-old Grace, sitting beside her, held out a finger for the baby to hold for balance and security.

"I don't want him to waste his money," said Mary-Love. "I want him to come here and stay with us. We have that extra room that used to be Oscar's. It's got a private bathroom and a sitting room he can set up a

drafting table in. I think I might go out and get one of those tables myself," she mused, or appeared to muse. "I have always wanted one."

"You have not," said Sister, contradicting her mother as she might have said, "Pass the peas, please."

"I have!"

"Mary-Love, why do you want Mr. Haskew staying here?" asked James.

"Because Sister and I are lonely, and Mr. Haskew needs a place to stay. He doesn't want to live all by himself. Who'd cook for him? Who'd wash his clothes? He's a nice man. We had him over to dinner one day when he was here before, remember? James, write to that man and tell him he can stay here in this nice big house with us."

"He ate his peas on a knife," added Sister. "Mama, you said you had never seen a decent man do that in public. You wondered what kind of home he came from. I was the only one in this house who was nice to him. One evening Mr. Haskew came by to speak to Oscar, and Elinor got right up out of the chair and walked away and wouldn't even let herself be introduced to him. Never saw anything so rude in my life."

"Why do you suppose she did that?" asked James, who now suddenly had an inkling what Mary-Love's energetic and unexpected proposal was all about.

"I don't know," said Mary-Love quickly. "What I *do* want to know is, are you gone write that letter, James, or am I?"

James shrugged, though he didn't know what was to come of it. "I'll write it tomorrow at the office—"

"Why not tonight?"

"Mary-Love, how do you know that that man's gone say yes? He may not *want* to live here."

"Why wouldn't he?" demanded Mary-Love.

"Well," said James after a moment, "maybe he wouldn't want to be in the house with a tiny baby, that cries."

"Miriam doesn't cry," said Sister indignantly.

"I know she doesn't," returned James, "but babies tend to, and you cain't expect Early Haskew to realize he's dealing with a special case here."

"Well, you tell him he is," said Mary-Love, and James agreed to write the letter that very night.

“And James,” said Mary-Love in a whisper as she saw her brother-in-law out the door that evening, “one more thing. Not a word to Oscar about this and not a word to Elinor, either. I want it all set up before we say anything—I want it all to be such a surprise!”

Chapter 14

Plans and Predictions

Early Haskew received letters from both Mary-Love Caskey and her brother-in-law, James, offering the hospitality of Mary-Love's home and Mary-Love's table for the duration of the engineer's stay in Perdido. Early wrote back a roughly worded but polite refusal, stating that he did not wish to take advantage of the town and the one family in particular that was to provide him lucrative employment for an extended period of time. Two more letters were fired off; James stating that Mary-Love's offer was made wholly without prejudice or prompting and that—since no house was available to purchase—it would be a solution that seemed best all around, and Mary-Love complaining that she had just purchased a drafting table and what on earth was she to do with *that* if Early Haskew took up residence in the Osceola Hotel. Weakened by this second volley, Early Haskew made a polite capitulation. The surrendered man, however, insisted upon paying ten dollars a week for his room and board.

The engineer came to Perdido in March 1922. Bray Sugarwhite fetched him in Mary-Love's automobile from the Atmore station, and he arrived at Mary-Love's house in time for dinner that Wednesday afternoon.

Sister was immediately shy about the man, who was large and handsome and unselfconscious in a way that was not at all characteristic of the male population of Perdido. Early Haskew was certainly different from Oscar, who was quiet and—in his way—subtle. And the man seemed nothing at all like James, whose quietness and greater subtlety were distinctly tinged by femininity. There was nothing quiet or subtle or feminine about Early Haskew. At dinner that night, his plate was several times nearly upset onto the tablecloth, he rattled his silverware, tea sloshed out of his glass, his napkin was in use constantly. Three times Ivey was called to replace his fork that had dropped, again, to the floor. When he mentioned in the course of conversation that his mother had been almost stone-deaf, his habit of speaking loudly and of overenunciating his words seemed satisfactorily accounted for. He also explained that he had come by his unusual Christian name from the fact that his mother had been born an Early, in Fairfax County, Virginia. With all his large gestures, and the little

accidents that befell him at the table, he made the room seem a little small for comfort, as if the giant in a circus sideshow had been compelled to take up residence in the little people's caravan.

In Sister's memory, such a man had never before been found at Mary-Love's table. Mary-Love Caskey was genteel to the points of her teeth. Sister wondered at her mother's forbearance of Early's gaucheries, and at Mary-Love's sincere hospitality toward the engineer. "I hope, Mr. Haskew," said Mary-Love with a smile that might have been described only as gleeful, "that you intend to save me and my family from the floodwaters."

"I intend to do just that, Miz Caskey," replied Early Haskew in a voice that would have reached her had she been sitting at the table in Elinor's house. "That's why I'm here. And I sure do like my room upstairs. I just wish you hadn't gone to the expense of that drafting table!"

"If that drafting table can save us from another flood, it's gone be worth every penny I spent on it. Besides, I don't believe you would have come to live with us if I hadn't had that thing ready waiting."

After dinner, when James had returned to the mill and Mary-Love and Sister and Early were sitting on the porch with glasses of tea, they noticed Zaddie Sapp passing by, evidently off on some errand for Elinor. Quickly, and in a low voice, Mary-Love said, "Sister, tell Zaddie to come up on the porch for a minute."

Zaddie rather wondered at the summons, for she was Elinor's acknowledged creature and as such hardly welcome in Mary-Love's house —or even on that porch. Zaddie still raked Mary-Love's yard every morning, but Mary-Love could scarcely bring herself to nod a greeting to the twelve-year-old.

"Hey, Zaddie," said Mary-Love, "come on inside. There's somebody I want you to meet."

Zaddie came through the screen door and onto the side porch. She stared at Early Haskew, and he stared at her.

"Zaddie," said Mary-Love, "this is Early Haskew. This is the man who's gone save Perdido from the next flood."

"Ma'am?"

"Mr. Haskew is gone build a levee to save Perdido!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Zaddie politely.

"How you do, Zaddie?" shouted Early Haskew, and Zaddie blinked at the force of his voice.

“I’m fine, Mr. Skew.”

“Haskew, Zaddie,” corrected Sister.

“I’m fine,” repeated Zaddie.

“Thank Mr. Haskew, Zaddie, for saving you from the next flood,” instructed Mary-Love.

“Thank you, sir,” said Zaddie obediently.

“You’re welcome, Zaddie.”

Zaddie and Early Haskew looked at each other in some puzzlement, for neither had any idea why this meeting should have been brought about. Zaddie wondered why she had been called over to be introduced to a white man when only that morning she had been shooed away when she tried to peek into Miriam’s carriage. And Early wondered if it were Mary-Love’s intention to introduce him to every man, woman, and child—white and colored and Indian—whose life and property would be protected by the levee he intended to build around the town.

Sister thought she had the answer. In the dissemination of information Zaddie was as efficient as a telegraph, and Elinor would learn of Early Haskew’s presence in Mary-Love’s house as surely as if a Western Union man came to the door and handed over the message in a yellow envelope.

Mary-Love said to Zaddie, “We have kept you, child. Weren’t you on an errand for Elinor?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Zaddie. “I got to go fetch some paraffin.”

“Then go do it,” said Mary-Love, and Zaddie ran away.

Mary-Love turned to Early and said, “Zaddie belongs to Elinor and Oscar. You’ve met my son.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But you haven’t met his wife Elinor, my daughter-in-law?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I suppose you will,” said Mary-Love offhandedly. “I hope you have the chance, that is. They live next door in that big white house. I built that house for them as a wedding present.”

“It’s a fine house!”

“I know it. But you’ll see, Mr. Haskew, when you’ve been here a little longer, that there’s not much back-and-forthing between these two houses.”

“No, ma’am,” said Early Haskew politely, quite as if he understood all about it.

“Well...” said Mary-Love hesitantly, then abruptly concluded, “that’s all.”

. . .

The town council meeting that evening was attended not only by the directly elected members of the board—Oscar, Henry Turk, Dr. Leo Benquith, and three other men—but also by James Caskey and Tom DeBordenave as vitally interested parties and as millowners. Before these men Early Haskew presented a rough plan, timetable, and schedule of expenses for the construction of the levees.

The levee was to be in three parts. The largest and most substantial portion would be raised on either side of the Perdido below the junction. This would protect downtown and the area of millworkers’ houses to the west of the river and Baptist Bottom to the east. The bridge over the Perdido just below the Osceola Hotel would be widened and raised to the height of the levee, and gentle approach ramps constructed. In large measure, this was a municipal levee, for it protected the greater part of residential and commercial Perdido. A second levee, half a mile long and connecting with the first, would be raised on the southern bank of the Blackwater River, which came from the northeast of town from its source in the cypress swamp. This levee would protect the three sawmills. The third portion of the levee was shortest of all; it would run along the southern bank of the Perdido above the junction, and would protect the five homes belonging to Henry Turk, Tom DeBordenave, James Caskey, Mary-Love Caskey, and Oscar Caskey. This levee would end a hundred yards or so beyond the town line. When the rivers rose again, as was bound to happen in the course of things, the levees would protect the town, and only the uninhabited lowlands directly south of Perdido, along the course of the river, would be flooded.

In four months, Early would have detailed plans. Construction of the levee could begin immediately thereafter. The work would take at least fifteen months for the double levee along the lower Perdido, and six months each for the secondary levees. The cost he estimated to be about one million one hundred thousand dollars, a sum which momentarily staggered the town council.

Early sat back for the remainder of the meeting while the leaders of Perdido thrashed out the question. In 1919 the town had lost considerably more than the projected cost of the levee. If the town grew and the mills cut

down more trees and produced more lumber, Perdido stood to lose even more in a subsequent flood. Therefore, if the money could be in any way procured, the levee ought to be built. James and Oscar, agreeing by a simple nod between them, offered to pay Early's expenses while he made up detailed plans for the levee. This would be the Caskey's contribution to the town that had fostered them. Thus authorized and encouraged to forge ahead, Early took his leave of the meeting.

After the engineer had left, and many had said how highly they thought of the man, the leading citizens examined Early's figures again and determined that the municipal levee would cost seven hundred thousand dollars, the levee along the Blackwater would cost two hundred and fifty thousand, and the levee along the upper Perdido, behind the millowners' homes, would be one hundred and fifty thousand. The millowners, in separate conference, decided that they should bear the cost of the levee behind their own homes and that they should split with the town the cost of the levee that protected the mills. This lowered the town's burden to eight hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, and that at least *sounded* a good deal better than one million one hundred thousand.

James agreed to drive to Bay Minette and call upon the Baldwin County legislator to see what could be done about a bond issue through the state government. Tom DeBordenave would talk to the banks in Mobile.

At all events, everyone felt better after the meeting. The flood of 1919 had been so disastrous, so unexpected, and the town had been so unprepared, even this first step toward protection seemed like a great deal to the town council. They imagined what it would be to have the levees in place. The waters of the Perdido and the Blackwater might rise high against Early Haskew's earthworks, but Perdido children, with sunny faces, would play at skip-rope and marbles on dry earth that was far below the level of the dark, swirling water lapping ominously on the other side.

. . .

That evening, while Oscar was at the meeting of the town council, Elinor sat with her sewing on the upstairs porch. Zaddie joined her there, and told about the strange thing that had happened to her that afternoon at Miss Mary-Love's.

"Why she want me to meet that man?" asked Zaddie curiously and with complete confidence that Elinor would be able to supply the answer.

Elinor had put down her sewing. Her mouth had tightened. She stood and went over to the porch railing. Her pregnant belly created only a little sway and awkwardness in her purposeful walk. “Don’t you know, Zaddie?”

“No, ma’am.”

Elinor turned and with barely suppressed anger said, “She wanted you to meet that man so you would come back here and tell me about it, that’s why!”

“Ma’am?”

“Zaddie, you know Miss Mary-Love won’t give me the time of day—”

“No, ma’am!” agreed Zaddie emphatically, as if that state of affairs had been reached only through some cunning stratagem of Elinor’s.

“—but she wanted me to know that *that man* was back in town.”

“You mean, Mr. Skew?”

Elinor nodded grimly.

“Why Miss Mary-Love want you to know that?”

“Because she knows how much I hate Early Haskew, that’s why. She did it to perturb my mind, Zaddie. And I’ll tell you something, it *does* perturb my mind!”

“Why?”

“Zaddie, don’t you know? Don’t you have any idea?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You know what that man wants to do? He wants to dam up the rivers. He wants to build levees all around this town to keep the rivers from flooding.”

“Miss El’nor, we don’t want no more floods,” said Zaddie cautiously. “Do we?”

“There aren’t going to be any more floods,” said Elinor emphatically.

“Ivey say there might be. Ivey say it all depend on the squirrels.”

“Ivey doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” said Elinor. “Ivey doesn’t know anything about floods.” She paced quickly back and forth along the long porch railing glancing now at Mary-Love’s house, now at her splendid grove of water oaks, but staring mostly down at the muddy red Perdido flowing swiftly and silently behind the house. Zaddie stood quite still with one raised hand grasping the swing chain as she watched Miss Elinor.

“None of them knows about floods or anything about the rivers, Zaddie. You’d think they’d have learned something, wouldn’t you, living so

long around here, where every time they look out the window they see the Perdido flowing by, where every time they go to work or go to the store they have to cross a bridge and see the water flowing under it, where they catch their fish for supper on Saturday night, where their oldest children get baptized, and where their youngest children drown. You'd think they'd know something by now, wouldn't you, Zaddie?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Zaddie quietly, but Miss Elinor did not even turn around to look at the black girl.

"They don't though," said Elinor bitterly. "They don't know anything. They're going to hire *that man* to build levees, they're going to pretend that the rivers aren't there anymore. And, Zaddie, Miss Mary-Love's going to see to help this project along, even if she has to take money out of her own purse to do it. And do you know why?"

"Why?"

"To spite me. That's why she's doing it, and for no other reason in the world. Lord, that woman despises me!" Elinor turned suddenly back, strode forward and threw herself into the swing. She looked at Zaddie, who had seated herself cautiously in the swing beside Elinor. With one swift kick Elinor propelled the swing into motion. She pressed both hands against her belly, and when she spoke her words seemed to join in rhythm with the jerking chain.

"Zaddie, do you know what we're going to see a few months from now when we sit in this swing?"

"No, ma'am. What?"

"We're going to be looking at a pile of dirt. *That man* is going to block our view of the river with a pile of dirt. And Mary-Love is going to be out there with a shovel helping. She'll do it to make me mad. And she'll put a shovel in Sister's hands. And she'll have Miriam out there in a baby carriage, and she'll lean over and she'll say to Miriam, 'Oh, you watch, child, you watch me ruin your mama's view! You watch me raise up earth in front of your real mama's eyes!' Oh, I hate it, Zaddie! I hate it all like hell!"

Elinor rocked in the swing and stared out at the Perdido. Her breath was harsh and uneven.

"Miss El'nor, can I ask you a question?" said Zaddie timidly.

"What?"

“What if they don’t put up the levee? Won’t there be another flood? Sometime, I mean. Miss El’nor, people died in that flood!”

Elinor put her foot down sharply and the swing stopped with a jerk, nearly pitching Zaddie out onto the floor. Elinor turned and looked directly into the black girl’s face.

“Zaddie, you listen to me. That levee—if it ever gets built—is not going to do this town one bit of good.”

“What you mean?”

“I mean that while I am alive and while I am living in this house, whether there’s a levee or not there will be no flood in Perdido. The rivers will not rise.”

“Miss El’nor, you cain’t—”

Elinor ignored the protest. “But, Zaddie, when I am dead—whether there’s a levee or not, this town and everybody in it will be washed off the face of the earth...”

Chapter 15

The Baptism

When Zaddie went to Elinor with news of the arrival in town of Early Haskew she had not known that this man was to live in the house right next door. Mary-Love would have given much to see Elinor's face when she learned that Early was to sleep in the bed in the room that Elinor herself had occupied not so many months before. Oscar, not anticipating his wife's reaction, had mentioned this only in passing that evening. The following evening Oscar and his wife were walking past Mary-Love's house on the way to the Ritz and saw Early sitting on the porch with Sister. Elinor stopped in her tracks, turned and marched home, and wouldn't speak a single word to Oscar for the rest of the night. She strung a hammock on the upstairs porch and slept within sight of the river.

Calmer next morning at the breakfast table, she said to Oscar, "Your mama wants me to lose this baby."

Oscar raised his eyes in astonishment. "Elinor, what do you mean to say!"

"I mean to say Miss Mary-Love wants me to miscarry. She wants Miriam to be an only child so she can lord Miriam over me and you."

Oscar had never before heard Elinor speak of their daughter, and now that she had, he was dumbfounded by the perversity of her attitude.

"Elinor," he said earnestly, "that is just wrong. Why would you think a horrible thing like that?"

"There is no other reason for her to have asked *that man* into her house."

"Mr. Haskew?"

"That man is sleeping in *your* room, Oscar."

"I know it. And I think Mama is doing a fine thing. I think she looks on it as something she is doing for the benefit of Perdido, providing a pleasant place for Mr. Haskew to do his drawings. Did you know she bought him a table that put her back sixty-five dollars? And a chair with a swivel seat that was fifteen dollars more? Mama was looking out for Mr. Haskew's well-being."

Elinor turned away and stared out the window at Mary-Love's house. "It just makes me ill to sit here and look at that house and to know *that man* is sitting inside it with a pencil and a ruler, drawing up the levee."

Oscar thought he began to understand. "Now, I sort of remembered that you didn't take to Mr. Haskew when he was here a year or so ago—"

Elinor looked at her husband with a countenance that seemed to say, *That is an Alabama understatement.*

"—but I thought it was just because you didn't take to *him*, you know, the way I don't take to okra. But it wasn't, was it? It was just because he was coming here to build the levee, and you don't like the levee."

"That's right. I don't like the levee, Oscar. This town doesn't need it. There won't be any more floods."

"Elinor, you just cain't be sure of that. We cain't afford to take chances. Even if I was sure nobody was gone die, I'd try to push it through. Do you know how much lumber we lost in 1919? Do you know how much *money* we lost? And we were lucky. Poor old Tom DeBordenave hasn't recovered yet, and I'm not sure he ever will. That flood could come again next year, and then if *any* of us recovered I'd be mighty surprised."

"There won't be any high water next year," said Elinor calmly.

Oscar regarded his wife with a baffled face. "Elinor," he said at last, "you just cain't let Mr. Haskew upset you. He is a very nice man and I'm sure he doesn't want to hear that he is distressing a pregnant woman in the next house over."

"Miss Mary-Love did this on purpose," Elinor repeated.

They were back where they had begun. Oscar sighed, got up from the table, and prepared to leave for work. He knew that Elinor's view was as distorted as the image of an object observed through ten feet of flowing river water. But that afternoon when he dropped by his mother's house on the way home, in the middle of a discussion about how things were going at the mill, Mary-Love said, "Oscar, does Elinor know that Mr. Haskew has taken up residence here with us?"

"She knows it," said Oscar shortly. After the sudden introduction of a new subject into the conversation, it was best to say as little as possible in reply. A man never knew what someone wanted to get out of him.

"Well, what did she say?"

That river water wasn't flowing as quickly anymore. Oscar was beginning to see what rested on the shifting bed so far below the surface.

“She didn’t say much, Mama. Elinor doesn’t think this town needs a levee. Elinor doesn’t think there’s going to be another flood. So I suppose she thinks that Mr. Haskew is wasting his time and that we are wasting our money.”

Mary-Love snorted in contempt. “What does Elinor know about floods and levees? What does Elinor know about people’s houses and businesses getting washed away in rising water?”

“Well,” Oscar pointed out, “she got trapped by the water. If you recall, Bray and I found her stranded in the Osceola Hotel.”

Mary-Love said nothing, but her face was so expressive of the delicate wish that Elinor Dammert had remained stranded until she starved or perished of damp ennui that Oscar responded as if the remark had been made aloud. “Mama, if I hadn’t rescued Elinor and then married her, you wouldn’t have Miriam.”

“That is true,” admitted Mary-Love. “I will always be grateful to Elinor for giving me her little girl. Her first child. She didn’t have to do it. So, Elinor didn’t say anything about Mr. Haskew? Did you tell her we had given Mr. Haskew your old room? And that he is sleeping in the bed that she gave birth in?”

Oscar was surprised into silence for a few moments. He was shocked that his mother had given herself away so easily. He could see quite clearly through the river water now, and he realized that Elinor had understood from the beginning. Mary-Love’s invitation to Early Haskew *had* been made precisely to aggravate Elinor, though Oscar wasn’t convinced that Mary-Love was seeking to induce a miscarriage. The acknowledgment of this meanness in his mother—there was no other word for it—turned Oscar firmly to his wife’s side on the issue. He would have had his tongue ripped out of his throat rather than say to Mary-Love that Elinor was distressed by the proximity of the engineer. In fact, he went so far as actually to mislead his mother by remarking, “Elinor is glad you’ve got somebody to keep you company. She figures you may have been lonely since we moved. That house is so big, Mama, and it takes so much time and effort just to keep it going that Elinor doesn’t get over here as much as she would like.”

Mary-Love looked uncertainly at her son—whose face was quite blandly pleasant—as if she were trying to determine whether or not he was playing a role, or whether he spoke—as men in Perdido, and probably men

everywhere, tended to speak—without any regard for the effect of his words.

At supper that evening Oscar told Elinor exactly what he had said to his mother, and Elinor, listening to that straightforward recital, had no doubt that Oscar understood the importance of his speech. She gave him far more credit than did his mother. Elinor smiled and said, "See what I told you, Oscar?"

"You were right about Mama, though I wouldn't have thought it of her. But, Elinor, I have got to say…"

"Say what?"

"That I am gone be supporting Mr. Haskew in his work. I think there's gone be another flood sooner or later, and I think the levees are gone have to be built. I know you don't like it, but I have got to do all I can to protect this town and the mills."

"All right, Oscar," said Elinor with surprising calmness. "You have started to see some things correctly, but you don't see everything right yet. The time will come when you will learn the error of your ways…"

. . .

Mary-Love had at first considered Early Haskew merely a goad to her daughter-in-law, but he quickly came to be more than that. He was a pleasant man, kind and gentle, and she soon grew used to his loud voice and his habit of eating peas with a knife. His countrified roughness wasn't totally unpleasant in a man so young and handsome, even though Mary-Love was certain that passing years would coarsen Early. Sister, too—or rather Sister, especially—liked him, for she had never spent any time at all around a man who wasn't close family.

Early sat in his sitting room all day working at the drafting table. Sister supplied him with cups of coffee and her own cookies. When the day was hot she got him iced tea, and when there wasn't anything more that she could get for him she went quietly into his room with a book and sat in a chair turned toward his profile.

"You worry him!" cried Mary-Love.

"I do not!" protested Sister. And if she did, he showed no sign of it. He must have said thank you to Sister eighty times a day, and that thank you was always cordial and sincere. When Mary-Love insisted that Sister leave the engineer alone and sit with her on the side porch with another quilt that

they were piecing together, Sister fidgeted until Mary-Love gave reluctant consent for her to return to her place beside Early's drafting board.

Occasionally, when he said his eyes were weary, he'd come down and sit on the porch with Sister and Mary-Love and rock in the swing with his eyes closed and talk in a moderate voice. He went for long walks about town, particularly along the banks of the rivers, looking at soil and formations of clay. Other times Bray drove him out deep into Baldwin and Escambia counties to look over quarries of various sorts. He'd come back covered with mud. After he'd bathed and changed clothes, bits of red Alabama clay were still wedged in the creases of his face and beneath the nails of his large hands. Miriam loved him, and in the evening he'd bounce her up and down on his knee to her delight for as long as she wanted it.

Because of him, commerce between Mary-Love's and Oscar's houses very nearly ceased altogether. There were no more small gifts of fruits or preserves sent over with Zaddie; Oscar did not come as frequently as formerly. Even the sisters Zaddie and Ivey seemed to have dissolved their kinship. Mary-Love satisfied herself with the thought that she had embedded a large thorn in the side of her daughter-in-law. One day, seeking to probe that wound, Mary-Love remarked to her son, "Oscar, we don't see much of Elinor anymore. Is she doing all right? We have been worried."

Oscar replied, "Well, Mama, it's getting 'long about that time, you know, and it wouldn't do for Elinor to tire herself out with constant visiting. In fact," he joked, "I keep her locked in her room all the time now. I have Zaddie standing outside the door, reading to her through the keyhole."

Oscar said this in order to deprive his mother of the satisfaction of any information about just how upset Elinor continued to be. But what he said regarding his wife's pregnancy was quite true; it *was* getting along about that time. In fact, by Oscar's casual calculation, the baby—Elinor still hadn't told him whether it was to be a boy or a girl—was already overdue.

But overdue or not, the baby held off for another four weeks. Oscar became truly worried. Elinor was not feeling very well and she took to her bed. Dr. Benquith came to examine her and afterward he told Oscar, "She's in discomfort."

"Yes, but is the baby all right?"

"It's kicking. I felt it."

"Well, tell me, is it gone be a boy or a girl?"

Leo Benquith looked strangely at Oscar, and didn't reply for a moment.

"I bet this one's gone be a boy," said Oscar. "Am I right?"

"Oscar," said Dr. Benquith slowly, "you know, don't you, that there's no way in the world to tell if it's gone be a boy or a girl?"

Oscar looked puzzled for a moment, then replied, "Well, you know, that's what I used to think. I mean, that's what I had always heard. But Elinor knows—I *know* she knows—she just won't tell me."

"Your wife has been manipulating one of your lower extremities, Oscar."

Oscar's curiosity was soon satisfied, for on the nineteenth of May, 1922, Elinor gave birth to a five-pound girl.

. . .

The doctor had left, and Roxie was downstairs washing the bloody linen, when Oscar said to Elinor, "Did you know it was gone be a girl?"

"Of course I did."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to be disappointed." She held out the baby for Oscar's inspection. "You probably wanted a boy, Oscar, but I knew once you had seen this little girl you would love her to death! That's why I didn't tell you."

"I do love her to death! I would have loved her anyway!"

"Well, then," said Elinor softly, putting the infant to her breast, "I was wrong about it. Next time I *will* tell you."

There was a sort of state visit that afternoon by Mary-Love and Sister. Sister carried Miriam in her arms, and Oscar reflected somewhat uncomfortably that this was the first time his firstborn daughter had ever been inside her parents' house. After having peered curiously into all the rooms on the way up, exclaiming softly and disparagingly on what they saw, Sister and Mary-Love entered Elinor's bedroom and stood on opposite sides of the bed. As if at a prearranged signal, they bent down together and kissed Elinor on either cheek. Elinor pulled back the corner of the blanket that was wrapped about her new daughter, and said, "See? Now I've got one of my own." She looked at her first daughter, still in Sister's arms, and said, "Miriam, this is your sister Frances."

"Is that what we are calling her?" said Oscar.

"Yes," replied Elinor, then added after a moment, "it was my mother's name."

"It's a real pretty name," said Mary-Love. "Elinor, Sister and I don't want to tire you out, so listen, if there's anything you need, you just send Zaddie over, and we will drop everything and go out and get it."

"I thank you, Miss Mary-Love. Thank you, Sister."

"Mama, we ought to go. Early's gone wonder what became of us."

At the mention of the engineer's name, Elinor's polite smile froze. She didn't say another word to Sister or Mary-Love.

That night, while Elinor—remarkably recovered—was walking around and around the nursery with Frances, singing to the baby and holding it out to stare at it and make faces at it and grin at it and drawing it back in again to kiss and fondle, Oscar performed calculations on the birth of his daughter that weren't so casual. He worked back nine months from this date of Frances's birth—Leo Benquith had told him that the delivery and the pregnancy had been normal in every respect—and came up with August 19, 1921.

That was the date they had moved into the new house. He certainly remembered that he and Elinor had made love that night, for it had been the first time in their own home—but what he also remembered, with not a little uneasiness, was that that was also the date on which, earlier in the evening, Elinor had *announced* her pregnancy.

. . .

The night of the birth of Frances Caskey, Elinor declared her intention of remaining in the nursery with her new daughter. Pleased that his wife was showing such interest and delight in her new child, in such sharp contrast to her treatment of Miriam, Oscar eagerly acquiesced. He lay in bed a long while, unable to fall asleep, thinking of Elinor, the pregnancy, and the peculiar coincidence of dates.

Next door, in Mary-Love's house, Early Haskew snored louder than he talked. Mary-Love tossed in her bed, pondering what effect the birth of Frances might have on things, fearing that the child might be the means by which Elinor gained an ascendancy acknowledged all over Perdido. And in her room, Sister thought alternately of Miriam, whom she loved very dearly, and of the man snoring in the room at the end of the hall, to whom she was not indifferent. Beside Sister in the bed, little Miriam Caskey dreamed her formless dreams of nameless things to eat and nameless things

to pick up and nameless things to hide in the little box that Mary-Love had given her.

And in the next house, Grace Caskey tossed and turned and didn't even want to go to sleep, so excited was she by the birth of Frances. Grace envisioned a trio of cousins—herself, Miriam, and Frances—loyal and loving. James Caskey thought—or did he dream?—of the earth above his wife's grave, and wondered whether it ought not to be planted over in verbena or phlox. Eventually all the Caskeys fell asleep, and all dreamed of whatever concerned them most.

That night while the Caskeys slept and dreamed, fog roiled up out of the Perdido River and spilled across the dry Caskey property.

Fogs were not uncommon in this part of Alabama, but they came only at night and were seen by few. This fog, thicker and darker than usual, rose up out of the river as a beast of prey rises up in the night after a long diurnal sleep, keen to slake its hunger. It wrapped itself around the Caskey houses, enveloping them in a silent, thick, unmoving mist. What before had been only dark was now black. It was so silent, so subtle, that its arrival waked no one at all. The river moisture pervaded the houses and surrounded the sleepers with a suffocating dampness. Even Early Haskew's snoring was muffled. Yet still none of the Caskeys woke, and if they struggled against it, they did so only in their dreams, dreams in which the oppressive fog had arms and legs that were slick and damp, and a mouth that exhaled mist and night.

Zaddie Sapp was the only one to know of it. She dreamed of the fog, dreamed that its moist fingers pulled back the sheet from her cot so that she grew chill, and dreamed that the fog awakened her and beckoned her to come out from the protection of her tiny closet behind the kitchen. The dream was so convincing that Zaddie opened her eyes to prove to herself that the fog was not there. But when she did so, and looked straight up at the ceiling, Zaddie saw thick wisps of the mist floating in her window. At the same time, very soft and muffled, she heard the sodden creak of the hinges of the lattice-door at the back of the house. At first she disbelieved her ears, the sound seemed so distant. Then she heard a step upon the stairs that led down to the back yard.

She sat up suddenly, and wisps of fog swirled into sudden turbulence before her eyes. Zaddie wasn't afraid of thieves, because nothing had been stolen in Perdido since "Railroad" Bill held up the Turk's mill in 1883, but

with trepidation she peered out the window. Little could be seen through the fog, but when she squinted she could just make out a dark form moving carefully down those steps.

Zaddie knew that it was Elinor.

One step creaked. The form paused. Zaddie perceived that Elinor carried something in her cradled arms, and what did cradled arms usually hold but a baby?

Night air and fog just couldn't be good for a child that wasn't yet a day old! Clad only in her nightgown, and without thinking to put on shoes, Zaddie jumped quietly out of the bed, opened the door of her little closet, and stepped out to the latticed back porch. She pushed open the back door, softly but without trying to disguise the fact that she was there. She stood on the back steps, and shut the door behind her.

Elinor was off in the yard ahead, nearly invisible in the fog.

"Miss El'nor," said Zaddie softly.

"Zaddie, go back inside." Elinor's voice sounded dreamy and moist. It seemed to come from a great distance.

Zaddie hesitated. "Miss El'nor, what you doing out here with that precious baby?"

Elinor shifted the child in her arms. "I'm going to baptize her in the Perdido water, and I don't need you to help. So you go back inside, you hear? A little girl like you could get lost in this fog and die!"

Elinor's voice faded, as did her shape. She was lost in the fog. Zaddie ran forward, fearful for the safety of the infant. "Miss El'nor!" Zaddie whispered in the inky darkness.

No answer came.

Zaddie ran forward toward the river. She tripped over the exposed root of one of the clumps of water oaks, and sprawled in the sand. She scrambled to her feet, and through a momentary thinning of the fog, could make out Miss Elinor's form at the edge of the water.

She again hurried forward, and grabbed her mistress's nightdress.

"Zaddie," said Elinor, her voice still distant and strange, "I told you to stay back."

"Miss El'nor, you cain't put that child in the water!"

Elinor laughed. "Do you think this river is going to hurt *my* little girl?" And with that, Elinor flung her newborn daughter into the swirling black

current of the Perdido. She might have been a fisherman tossing a too-small catch back into the river.

Zaddie had long been fearful of the Perdido, knowing how many people had drowned in its unabating currents. She had heard Ivey's stories of what lived on the riverbed, and what things hid in the mud. But despite her fear, despite the fact that it was night and that the night was filled with fog, Zaddie rushed into the water in hope of saving the infant that, incredibly, had been tossed in by its mother.

"Zaddie," cried Elinor, "come back. You'll drown!"

Zaddie caught the child—or at least thought she caught it. Reaching down into the water, she had scooped up *something*. It felt very little like a baby! It was so slippery and unsoft, yet rubbery—a fishlike thing—that she very nearly let it go again. Zaddie shuddered with repulsion for whatever it was that she held in her hands, but she raised it up above the surface. She saw that she had caught hold of something black and vile, with a neckless head attached directly to a thick body. A stubby tail that was almost as thick as the body twitched convulsively, and the thing was covered with river slime. In the air it struggled to get away, to return to its element. But Zaddie held it tight, closing her fingers into its disgusting flesh. From its fishy mouth emerged a stream of foamy water, and the thrashing tail smacked against Zaddie's forearms; dull, bulging eyes shone up into her face.

Elinor's hand closed over Zaddie's shoulder.

The girl stiffened, and looked around.

"You see," said Elinor, "my baby's fine."

In Zaddie's arms lay Frances Caskey, naked and limp, with Perdido river water dripping slowly from her elbows and feet.

"Come out of the water, Zaddie," said Elinor, drawing the girl out by the sleeve of her dress. "The bottom is muddy, and you could slide..."

. . .

Next morning, Roxie shook Zaddie out of her deep slumber, saying, "Child, you have not *begun* to rake this morning! What's wrong with you?" Zaddie dressed quickly, shaken but relieved that her previous night's adventure had been no more than a dream. She had wandered through a nightmare, reached safety, and been immediately overtaken with undisturbed sleep. It was unthinkable, in the light of morning, that Elinor would throw her newborn baby into the Perdido, and Zaddie didn't even allow herself to *think* of what she had caught up in her arms in the dream.

She ran to the kitchen and gobbled a biscuit. Grabbing her rake from its accustomed corner, she flung open the back door. For a moment, the sound of those hinges brought back the dream; but Zaddie merely grinned at her own fear. She ran down the back steps—and stopped dead in her tracks.

There in the sand were four sets of footprints. Two sets led down toward the river and two led back—and around the returning set were tiny circular depressions such as might be made where droplets of water dripped into the sand and dried.

With a heavy heart, Zaddie stepped off into the cool gray yard. With downcast eyes, she carefully obliterated those sets of footprints leading to and from the river, as if by that means she could blot out what had not been, after all, a dream. All the while she worked, she could hear Elinor on the second-floor sleeping porch. She was crooning a little tuneless song to her newborn baby.

Chapter 16

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

About the time of the birth of her niece Frances, Sister Caskey became overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness and inconsequence. Why she should be so affected now, when before she had always taken her condition so much for granted, she did not know. Perhaps it had something to do with Oscar's marriage to Elinor, and his escaping the house while she remained behind, serving as a sponge to soak up Mary-Love's resentment at her son's desertion. Perhaps it was something about Elinor herself, who was younger than Sister, but unquestionably more powerful—Elinor had fought as an equal with Mary-Love. Perhaps Sister was tired of her mother's mingy complaints against Elinor, against the town, and against Sister herself. Recently, Mary-Love had made her first attempts to take a greater share of control over Miriam, whom she had always shared equally with her daughter. Sister thought she resented this most of all. She knew that soon Mary-Love would take the child away from her completely, and Sister would be alone again.

Although the Caskeys were better off than almost any other Perdido family, Sister had very little that was hers. She possessed no more than some odd stocks that had been birthday gifts and whose dividends were erratic and negligible. She remembered well enough the Caskey jewels, buried with Genevieve, which had so mysteriously appeared at the ceiling of the front bedroom of Elinor's house. But of that hoard, Sister had nothing at all. Except for the black pearls that Elinor took, Mary-Love had kept everything for herself and Miriam. Sister began to believe that her opinion was never solicited about any matter of consequence. One morning in July she showed up at James's office at the mill and declared herself fit and ready for any task that might be assigned to her. James looked at his niece in perplexity and misgiving, and said, "Lord, Sister, I cain't make heads or tails of this place myself, I don't know why you should be coming to *me* to tell you what you can do!" When she went to her brother with the same announcement, Oscar said, "Sister, there's nothing for you here, unless you can type-write or fix a broken-down chipper, and I know for a fact you

cain't." Sister felt that the family was conspiring to keep her from the dignity and satisfaction of common human responsibilities.

She suggested to Mary-Love that she might open a store on Palafox Street to sell threads and buttons, but Mary-Love said, "No, Sister, I'm not gone give you the money, because the place would close down in six months. What do you know about running a shop? Besides, I want you here at home with me." When her mother said that, Sister realized that "at home" was exactly where she did not want to remain for the rest of her life.

Sister was weary of all of it, and Sister thought she saw a way out.

Her solution wasn't a new one; it was a remedy common all over the world. Procuring a husband would make all things right. As she began the task of looking about for likely candidates for the position, she discovered to her gratification that the most eligible man in Perdido—the one most exactly suited to her purposes—was also the handiest. He was the man whose snoring she heard at the other end of the hallway every night. Early Haskew.

Early was handsome, in a just-coming-in-out-of-the-sun sort of way. He was an engineer and looked to have a good future before him. All the Caskeys liked him. But none of this really mattered to Sister. What was most important about Early Haskew was that when the levee was finished, he would move away from Perdido. It was only to be assumed that if Early were married by that time, he would take his wife away with him.

Sister had no experience in even the simplest forms of flirtation and allurement, and in this matter she could scarcely go to her mother or her mother's friends for advice. Elinor was also out of the question. So Sister went where she had gone once or twice before, to Ivey Sapp, Mary-Love's cook and maid. She knew that Ivey's advice would be supernatural in its base—and in its execution—but she could see no alternative. So, Sister, saying to herself, *I have nowhere else to turn*, went down into the kitchen one afternoon, and said to Ivey without preamble, "Ivey, you gone help me get married?"

"Sure will," said Ivey, without hesitation. "Somebody particular?"

. . .

Ivey Sapp had come to Mary-Love's house when she was sixteen, about three years earlier. She was shiny black and plump. Her legs were permanently bowed from riding the Sapp mule round and round the cane crusher for sometimes twelve hours a day. Finally she had grown tired of

the oppressive monotony of her existence at home, and longed for what her mother, Creola, contemptuously called “a life in the town.” A kind of marriage had been arranged with Bray Sugarwhite, a man much older than Ivey, but he was kind and well situated in the Caskey household.

Ivey’s principal fault—at least in Mary-Love’s eyes—was a sort of rampant superstition that saw devils in every tree and portents in every cloud and dark meanings in every casual accident. Ivey Sapp slept with charms, and there were *things* on a chain around her neck. She wouldn’t begin canning on a Friday, and she would run off and not return for the rest of the day if she saw anyone open an umbrella in the house. She wouldn’t carry out ashes after three o’clock in the afternoon lest there be a death in the family. She wouldn’t sweep after dark because she’d sweep good fortune out the door. She wouldn’t wash on New Year’s day lest she wash a corpse in the ensuing year. She had many prohibitions and exceptions, and a little rhyme or saying for each, so that the days were scarce on which she performed without objection every task assigned her. Mary-Love sometimes said she believed that Ivey made up half of it in order to shirk her duties, but Ivey had plenty of superstition that was in no way connected with work. Thus it was a disconcerting fact of life in the Caskey household that the most innocent gesture observed by Ivey or unthinkingly reported to her elicited a dire prediction: “If you sing before you eat, you cry before you sleep,” for instance. Before Miriam was born, Mary-Love always declared herself glad that there were no children in the house, because Ivey would have turned them into sniveling, frightened creatures, with her tales and warnings of things that waited for you in the forest and looked in your windows and hitched rides on the underside of your boat.

. . .

“So what am I supposed to do?” said Sister, having with some embarrassment confessed to Ivey that she wanted to marry none other than Early Haskew.

Ivey sat down at the kitchen table and appeared to lose herself in thought and incomprehensible murmurings as she began mechanically to snap the ends off a basinful of beans. Sister impatiently sat by, but dared not interrupt Ivey’s reverie. Sister declared to herself that she put no faith in superstition or in Ivey’s charms and rituals, but it was difficult to maintain that skepticism while Ivey sat before her in the midst of her incantatory monologue. After several minutes, Ivey’s eyes fell closed; her hands

dropped into her lap. She remained perfectly still for such a long time that Sister began to worry. Quite suddenly, Ivey's eyes snapped open, and she asked, "What's today?"

"Wednesday," replied Sister, quite as alarmed as if Ivey had said, *I have seen the Lord of the Evil Angels.*

"On Friday," said Ivey, "go out and buy me a live chicken."

Sister sat back, confused. "Ivey—"

"Don't buy it from a woman, make sure you buy it from a man. A chicken bought from a woman won't do us no good at all."

. . .

On Friday, Sister went downtown and loitered around Grady Henderson's store until Thelma Henderson left the counter to go into the back for something. Then Sister sprang out from behind a barrel, and cried, "Grady, can you get me a chicken, please? I'm in a real hurry."

"Thelma'll be right back out, Miz Caskey. She'll take care of you."

"Oh, Lord, Grady, I just looked at my watch"—she wasn't wearing one, and the grocer could see that too—"and I am supposed to have been back at the house half an hour ago. You know what Mama's gone say to me?"

Grady Henderson knew Mary-Love and could just about imagine. "Which one you want?" he asked, going over to the glass case where the chickens lay in porcelain trays.

"I need a live one, can you get me one out back? I got to have a spring chicken—that hasn't laid an egg yet," she added anxiously and with some embarrassment. "You've probably got one, haven't you?"

Grady Henderson looked at Sister closely, shrugged, and went out through a door in the rear. Sister followed him outside into a small dark shed that housed coops for fowl. "This one here," said Grady, pointing into a coop that contained half a dozen dirty white chickens of various sizes and ages.

Sister nodded. "She looks young." Mr. Henderson opened the coop, drew the chicken out by its neck, and threw it into a scales that was hanging from the ceiling. "Two and a half pounds, that's about forty-five cents. Here, I'll put her in a bag and you go on inside and give Thelma the money."

"No," cried Sister in alarm, pulling a dollar bill from her pocket. "I'll just give this to you, Grady. You keep the change— I *got* to get on back

home!"

"Miz Caskey, there is something wrong with you today. You gave me a whole dollar. Let me give you another chicken."

"No, I just want this one!" she cried. She drew back her shoulders and, more quietly, assured him, "I'll be all right."

Then, holding out before her the croker sack with the chicken inside, Sister ran home, sneaking in the back way so her mother wouldn't see her.

"Your Mama's gone out," said Ivey, peering into the sack. "She say she be back for supper, so we gone do this thing right now."

"Don't we have to wait till it's dark?"

"What for? Who you been talking to, Miz Caskey? I know what I'm doing." Then, with no mystic passes or murmured incantations and with Sister still holding on to the sack, Ivey reached in and twisted off the head of the spring chicken. She pressed Sister's hands together and the top of the jerking sack closed. Sister held it at arm's length and watched with horror as spots of blood soaked through the burlap. When no motion could be detected, Ivey reached in and withdrew the body of the chicken. Its feathers were splattered with the blood that had poured out of its wrung neck. Holding the wretched fowl by the feet, Ivey slit open the breast of the chicken with a small knife, then pressed her pudgy fingers inside the carcass, groped around for a moment and then brought out its bloody heart. This she dropped unceremoniously onto a saucer on the kitchen table.

Leaving Sister to clean the kitchen of blood, Ivey buried the chicken and its head in a hole she had dug in the sand beside the kitchen steps. She folded the burlap and hid it beneath a stack of old newspapers on the back porch. Sister watched all this without daring to question what portion of this complex procedure was legitimate and necessary, and what part was only to keep the business secret from Mary-Love. Ivey motioned Sister to follow her back into the kitchen.

From a drawer of kitchen implements, Ivey took five skewers and laid them in a neat row on the kitchen table. She then seated herself before them, picked up the saucer that held the chicken's heart, and offered it to Sister. Sister gingerly plucked the heart off the plate.

Ivey smashed the saucer on the floor of the kitchen and motioned for Sister to walk around the table.

Sister, half-embarrassed, half-fearful, did so.

"Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," said Ivey.

"Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," repeated Sister. Following Ivey's silent directions, she paced around the table thrice, each time repeating that same incantation, the very familiarity of which was of comfort to Sister.

Sister ended her movement around the table standing beside Ivey's chair. The black woman then took up one of the skewers, handed it to Sister, and indicated a spot at the right side of the chicken heart that lay in Sister's outstretched hand. Sister had already understood that Ivey's directions were to be silent, except for the formulas, which Sister was to repeat *verbatim*. As Sister pierced the heart with the skewer and pressed it through, Ivey intoned, *"As I am piercing the heart of this innocent hen, so will Early Haskew's heart be thrust through with love of me."* Sister, with widened eyes, held the end of the skewer and repeated the words.

With the second skewer Ivey pointed to a spot on the front of the chicken heart, and said, *"This thrust will pierce Early's heart until the day he asks me to be his wife."* Sister repeated these words as she pressed the skewer through.

The third skewer went from the back to the front, and Sister said, after Ivey, *"For life and for death, Early Haskew, I belong to you."*

The fourth skewer went from side to side, starting from the left. *"What's mine is yours, what's yours is mine."*

Ivey took up the last skewer and pressed a point at the bottom of the heart. Sister pierced the heart from there, and the point of the skewer came out the top with a drop of blood on it. *"Five wounds had Jesus, and by them will you be stricken unto death, Early Haskew, if we are not man and wife within the year. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen."*

Sister was about to speak, protesting that she had no wish that the alternative to her marriage should be Early's death, but Ivey shook her head emphatically to enjoin silence. Ivey rose from the table, then went over to the stove and opened the grate. Sister noticed for the first time that Ivey had kept the stove hot all afternoon.

Sister tossed the skewered heart inside, where it fell upon a bed of glowing embers and began to sizzle. Sister and Ivey peered in and watched as it glowed red, and then burned with a crimson flame. Soon nothing was left but the five glowing skewers, which finally dropped down onto the coals, still interwoven into a pentagon.

Ivey slammed the stove door shut. The two women stood up straight, and in unison repeated the incantation that no longer seemed so familiar and comforting to Sister. *"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."*

Chapter 17

Dominoes

The first sawmill in Perdido had been built by Roland Caskey in 1875. The old man subsequently gained cutting control of eighteen thousand acres of timberland in Baldwin and Escambia counties. By 1895, when he died, the Caskey mill was producing twenty-five thousand feet of lumber a day. The cut-down trees that his Perdido mill couldn't handle were branded with a trefoil and sent down the Perdido to his backup mill at Seminole. Roland Caskey remained illiterate to his death, but he could look at a two-acre stand of timber and tell, within twenty board feet, how much lumber it would produce. He had had, moreover, the sense to marry a smart woman. Elvennia Caskey bore him two sons and a daughter. The daughter died, bitten by a water moccasin that one day slithered up the lawn out of the Perdido, but the two sons grew up strong and fine. Because of their mother's efforts they were well-educated, well-mannered, and emotionally sensitive. Indeed, Roland complained of "the stamp of femininity" placed on his elder son James, which would render him soft and womanly.

When Roland Caskey had settled in the area, Baldwin and Escambia counties were wildernesses of pine, and it seemed inconceivable that the forests could ever be depleted, yet only three mills working at capacity began to accomplish this depletion. Expanding uses for resin and turpentine only made matters worse, for thousands of trees were "bled" by impoverished poachers. Once bled, a tree wasn't worth cutting. The forest retreated around Perdido and the barrens farther out grew less dense, as bled trees died and toppled in the first spring storm. Roland Caskey complained bitterly when the Secretary of the Interior proposed strict laws for the preservation of the forests and demanded rigid enforcement of earlier legislation.

Roland Caskey's will divided his holdings equally between his wife and his younger son Randolph, leaving only a small annual maintenance income to the other son James. He had dictated in the preamble of the document that he would not be able to sleep in his grave knowing that he had turned over the operation of his woodland empire to a man "with the stamp of femininity upon him." The day after the will was probated,

however, Elvennia Caskey signed over her half to the disinherited son. But it was not for this generosity alone that James Caskey remained with his mother until her death, nursing her with unwavering filial affection through years of senility and physical helplessness. The idea of marriage never occurred to him without a concomitant sensation of having put something nasty into his mouth.

When James and Randolph, in concert rarely found among brothers, took over the operation of the Caskey mill, they began buying up all the land they could around Perdido. Their father and the other millowners had thought that the purchase of timberland was a wasteful expenditure of capital; it was much cheaper to pay landowners for the right to cut the timber. James and Randolph's policy was universally wondered at and ridiculed, but they persisted. Having bought the land, they systematically began to cut what was on it, and replanted immediately. Within five years the wisdom of their course was acknowledged and imitated by the Turks and the DeBordenaves. The old Puckett mill in Perdido was eventually forced out of business altogether, for there was no more standing timber for Mr. Puckett to buy.

The DeBordenave and Turk mills for twenty years ranked second and third to the Caskeys'. Sometimes the DeBordenaves had a better year than the Turks, and vice versa, but only the millowners themselves really knew which company was worth more. The Caskeys owned the most land, however, and had never ceased buying it up whenever the opportunity presented itself. Randolph Caskey died when his son Oscar was away at the University of Alabama. James ran the mill ineffectually for two years before Oscar returned to Perdido to accede to his father's place. Oscar and James, prodded by Mary-Love, would not hesitate to purchase two acres of slash-pine surrounded by Turk forest. The smaller mills now worked the second and third growths of their land, but the Caskeys had some virgin forest, a rare thing in those parts.

Mary-Love and James Caskey owned the mill and the land, but Oscar ran the operation. James went to his office every day and occupied himself one way or another, principally in correspondence, but much of that effort was dispensable; the work could have been done by a man hired at two thousand dollars a year. But the company could not have functioned without Oscar. For all his effort and long hours, though, he had no more money than poor old Sister, and as everybody knew, Sister had nothing at all.

People in town who didn't know anything about the family's situation looked at the three Caskey houses and drew their own conclusions from the fact that Elinor and Oscar lived in the biggest and the newest. Since it was also thought that without Oscar the mill would slip into insolvency within a few weeks, everyone naturally imagined that Oscar possessed a substantial portion of the Caskey treasure. That was not so. Oscar and Elinor didn't even own the house they lived in. It had been Mary-Love's gift, but Mary-Love had never put herself to the trouble of actually signing over the deed. Once when Elinor prodded Oscar to remind his mother of that omission, Mary-Love grew huffy and said, "Oscar, do you and Elinor imagine that you are in danger of being thrown out onto the street? Who do you think I am going to put in there instead of you? When you two were living right down the hall from me, and I didn't want you to leave *then*, do you think I am gone let you go farther away from me than right next door?" Oscar returned to Elinor and told her what his mother had said, but Elinor was not to be put off quite so easily. She sent Oscar back, and this time he got an even angrier reply from his mother: "Oscar, you and Elinor are gone *get* that house when I die! Do you want me to show you the *will?* Cain't you even wait till I am dead?" Oscar refused to broach the matter again, but Elinor was not satisfied.

Perdido residents would have been surprised at the modest size of Oscar's salary. Oscar once ventured to complain to James, who pleaded the case to his sister-in-law. Mary-Love said, "What do they need? Tell me, James, and I will go out and buy it. I will have Bray put it right on their front doorstep."

"Mary-Love, it's nothing like that," James replied. "They don't need new furniture or a new car or anything, but Elinor needs money to buy food every week. They need money to pay the coalman in winter. Oscar ordered a new set of ivory dominoes last week, and when they came in he had to borrow ten dollars from me to pay for 'em. Mary-Love, I say we give old Oscar a little bit more money. You know he earns it."

"You tell Oscar to come to me," said Mary-Love. "I will give my boy whatever he wants. You tell Elinor to knock on my front door. She will have her heart's desire."

Mary-Love liked to see herself as the family cornucopia, dispensing all manner of good things, unstintingly, unceasingly. She considered herself amply rewarded by her children's gratitude, and if she perceived that her

children were not sufficiently grateful, she could make something of that, too. There was no difficulty in keeping Sister in a position of servile dependence, because, Mary-Love was certain, she had no prospect of marriage and no money of her own. Sister would never leave Perdido, her mother's house, or Mary-Love's fervid embrace. Oscar, though, had thrown himself into the bonds of matrimony with Elinor, and had thus weakened the emotional cords that had bound him to Mary-Love. The financial ties between mother and son, however, remained strong, or at least they would as long as Mary-Love had anything to say about it. Lady Bountiful had no intention of allowing Oscar to escape her boons.

Elinor understood all this and explained it to her husband.

Oscar replied, "You're probably right, Elinor. That's probably how Mama does it. It makes me sorry for poor old Sister, too. But what am I gone do?"

"You can fight her. You can tell her you're going to leave that old mill high and dry if you don't get some decent money out of it. You can tell her that you and I are going to pack our bags and move to Bayou le Batre next Tuesday, and let her know that I'll be back in another month to pick up Miriam. That's what you can do."

"I cain't do that. Mama wouldn't believe me. Mama would call my bluff. What would you and I do in Bayou le Batre, that old place? I don't know anything about shrimp boats!"

"If James and your mama did right by you," Elinor went on, "they would give you a one-third interest in that mill. They would sign over to you one-third of all the Caskey land."

Oscar whistled at the very thought. "They won't do it, though."

"Maybe not right now," said Elinor thoughtfully, "but, Oscar, if you're not going to do anything, then it looks like it's going to be up to me..."

"What you thinking about doing?" Oscar asked uneasily.

"I don't know yet. But, Oscar, let me tell you something. There is no sacrifice I would not make to put you where you are supposed to be."

"Elinor, you shouldn't have to go out of your way for me. We get along pretty well, it seems to me."

"Not as well as we could, Oscar. I didn't marry just *any*body, you know. My daddy used to say he'd like to see the man *I'd* marry. My mama used to say he'd have to be mighty powerful or mighty rich."

Oscar laughed. “I guess you proved your mama and daddy wrong. I’m not powerful and I’m certainly not rich.”

“Mama and Daddy weren’t wrong,” said Elinor. Those words somehow didn’t seem at home in Elinor’s mouth; certainly she wasn’t in the habit of speaking of her parents. “In fact, I have every intention of proving them right. Oscar, let me ask you something. What in the world would have been my purpose in coming to Perdido at all, if it wasn’t to marry the best man in town?”

“You mean you married me because you thought I was rich and powerful?” He didn’t seem in the least disturbed by the idea.

“Of course not. You know why I married you. But, Oscar, I have no intention of allowing you to continue to wear yourself out down at the mill just so James can buy crystal and silver and Miss Mary-Love can fill her safety-deposit box with diamonds while we are poor as poverty.”

“Well, Elinor, you just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. I wouldn’t mind having a lot of money.”

“Good,” replied his wife. “So when I tell you to jump, you’ll jump?”

“Right over the roof!”

. . .

Recently, a mania for the game of dominoes had infected the male population of Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Perdido had not been immune. The malady took hold with virulence, and in the first hectic flush of fever there had been domino parties every night throughout the town. Now that first unhealthy spasm had subsided, but many men continued to play regularly. Among these were the men of the three mill families, James Caskey, Oscar Caskey, Tom DeBordenave, and Henry Turk.

Every Monday and Wednesday evening at six-thirty they gathered at the square red table in Elinor’s breakfast room, joined by three others: Leo Benquith, Warren Moye, and Vernell Smith. Leo Benquith was the most respected doctor in town. Warren Moye was a dapper little man who stood behind the desk of the Osceola Hotel every day; he always brought with him a cushion, which he transferred from chair to chair to ease the pain of his everlasting hemorrhoids. Vernell Smith was rather in the character of a dwarf jester at the Spanish court; he was young and desperately ugly, with a long face that reminded farm folks of the head of a stillborn calf, except that Vernell’s had a number of large moles with long hairs in them.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, Elinor took special care to keep the doors to the breakfast room closed all evening long, for every one of those men smoked cigars or cigarettes and the smoke could fill the house. Every Monday and Wednesday afternoon, Zaddie took down the curtains in that room so that they would not become impregnated with the odor of tobacco. During the game, the countless cigar and cigarette butts were thrown into a glass cistern of water the size of a fishbowl. After a couple of hours, the room was always so filled with smoke that Zaddie could not come in to empty the cistern without her eyes immediately watering. And the room was noisy. The men growled and slammed their ivory dominoes down on the square table. The shuffling was thunderous and could be heard all over the house. There was no cursing, except an occasional "damn." With the exception of Vernell Smith, all these men went to Sunday school. The stories and the tales traded over that red table in the course of the evening were not so different from the stories and tales that Perdido ladies told over their afternoon bridge games.

On these evenings, Elinor and Zaddie sat on the front porch or on the porch upstairs. Elinor sewed and Zaddie read. Soon it became the custom for one of the other domino wives to come over with her husband and spend the evening with Elinor or to call and talk to her on the telephone. Whenever the visitor was Manda Turk or Caroline DeBordenave, Elinor showed an uncommon and insatiable interest in the details of their husbands' mills, soaking up every detail of the lumber business that those two women could summon up from minds untrained to such matters. Manda and Caroline agreed that Elinor must have a motive for the acquisition of this information, though Elinor declared that it was only curiosity. When the domino party finally broke up, the domino wife had already gone home alone and Elinor and Zaddie had gone to bed.

As Oscar saw his friends out the front door and the men spoke their good-nights, each one—except modest James Caskey—would relieve himself against one of Elinor's newly planted camellias. Then Oscar would wander back into the house and call out loudly, "Zaddie, get up and lock the doors!" Oscar was a kind man and a good one, but he had been trained to laziness by his mother, and if there was anything he could get a woman to do for him, he wouldn't hesitate to ask her to do it. As Oscar trudged upstairs, Zaddie would open the windows of the breakfast room, pour the cistern of butts out into the sandy yard, lock the front door, turn out all the

lights, return to her own closet, and with eyes still smarting from the smoke, lie down upon her cot and drift into sleep.

. . .

One Monday evening, while the men played downstairs, Elinor Caskey and Caroline DeBordenave sat on the porch upstairs. Frances's crib had been brought out and placed so that as the two women rocked in the swing they could peer over at the child. Elinor as usual had brought up the subject of the lumber business, and Caroline—knowing her hostess's interest in the topic by this time—had come prepared with information. She had questioned her husband to some extent at supper, and though he was surprised by his wife's sudden interest in what had never seemed to matter to her before, he answered all her questions in detail.

"No, Elinor," said Caroline, shaking her head, "it's just not going well for Tom. Now, I'm sure I'm not telling you anything new, because Tom said that both Henry Turk and Oscar knew about his trouble. It's strange, Tom never told *me*. I was so surprised! The flood did it. Tom lost all his records. He says he remembers that he had almost a hundred thousand dollars..." Caroline paused, unable to remember the precise term her husband had employed.

"In uncollected bills?" suggested Elinor.

"That's right," said Caroline complacently. Her tone suggested that she was gossiping about some small matter that was of no possible consequence to her, and indeed it seemed to Caroline as if it were not. The mills were matters for men. She assumed that nothing could or ever would interfere with the money Tom gave her every month to run the household and buy clothes; with her needs taken care of, Tom could do what he pleased with all the rest. "See, Elinor, the problem is, he not only lost all *that* money, but he lost all the lumber that was stored at the mill *and* all the lumber that he took out to Mr. Madsen's place, because Mr. Madsen's barn washed away too. Then most of the machinery got filled with mud and that had to be replaced and now there's no money. Tom says he doesn't know how he's going to be able to go on."

"Can't he borrow?" asked Elinor.

"Well, not much," said Caroline, with a little pride that she had taken care to ask her husband this question. "He went to the bank in Mobile and went down on twenty knees in front of the president asking for money to

build the mill back up, but the president of the bank said, 'Mr. DeBordenave, how do we know there's not gone be another flood?'"

"Because there's not!" said Elinor, definitely.

"Well, I certainly hope not," returned Caroline. "Even my best rugs had to be just thrown out. I was never so unhappy in all my life. Anyway, Tom said the bank wouldn't lend him any money because they thought that another flood was gone come along and wash everything away a second time."

"So he can't get the money?"

"Well, maybe he can and maybe he cain't. The banks say that they *will* lend money after the levee's built, but not before. So Tom is real anxious to get that thing put up. He just hopes he can hold out long enough. I hope he can, too," Caroline concluded reflectively. "When Tom is worried about that old mill, he doesn't pay one bit of attention to anything else in the world."

After Caroline had gone home Elinor remained on the porch with Frances, and, against her custom, waited up for Oscar. When he came up the stairs she called him out onto the porch and said, "Oscar, Caroline was telling me Tom is having trouble borrowing from the banks."

"Well, yes," replied Oscar hesitantly. "Fact is, we all are. Nobody's gone lend us any money to build up again until the levee goes up."

"What would happen if the levee *never* got built?"

Oscar sat down beside his wife. "Are you really interested?"

"Of course I am!"

"Well," said Oscar, sitting back and folding his hands behind his head, rocking the swing lightly, "old Tom would fold up his tents, I guess."

"What about us?"

"Well, we'd go along all right for a while. We'd get by, I guess."

"Just get by?"

"Elinor, what we're trying to do right now is build back up what we lost in the flood. But then if we really want to get the place going, then we've got to expand. We cain't do that without borrowing the money. There's not a bank in this state—or out of it for that matter—who's gone lend us money till the levee's built. *That's* why we're working so hard on this business. You see now?" Elinor nodded slowly. "I am dead on my feet," said Oscar. "You want to come to bed?"

"No," said Elinor, "I'm not tired yet. You go on."

Oscar rose, leaned down over the crib to kiss sleeping Frances, and went inside the house.

Long after Oscar had undressed, knelt at the side of his bed to pray, lain himself down and fallen as deeply asleep as his daughter, Elinor remained awake. She sat in the swing, rocking slowly and staring out into the darkness. In the black night, the water oaks swayed in the slightest wind. A few rotted branches, covered with a dry green fungus, dropped twigs and leaves, or sometimes fell whole, with a crack and a thump, on the sandy ground. Beyond, the Perdido flowed, muddy and black and gurgling, carrying dead things and struggling live ones inexorably toward the vortex in the center of the junction.

Chapter 18

Summer

Summer came to Perdido. Elinor continued to ponder about her husband's miniscule salary and the Caskeys' substantial wealth. Sister pushed open the back door every morning to stare at the barely discernible mound beneath which the eviscerated chicken lay buried and wondered when Early Haskew was going to propose, or, conversely, when he was going to die. James Caskey sighed and looked about and counted off his loneliness on his ten fingers—it seemed as substantial as that! Mary-Love greedily watched the engineer's daily progress on the plans for the levee, anticipating with great satisfaction the effect the construction would have on her daughter-in-law. And every morning Zaddie's patient rake still made patterns in the sandy yards around the three Caskey houses.

Only children really loved the summer, for of course there was no school. The days were long, unbroken by hours and tasks and bells. It was odd, to Grace Caskey, how each summer was different and possessed its own character. Last summer she had played with the Moye children constantly, and now this summer she saw them only once a week at Sunday school. Every day the previous summer, Bray had driven her out to Lake Pinchona, where a swimming pool with concrete sides was fed by the biggest artesian well in the entire state. A monkey in a wire cage nipped at her fingers when she stuck them through the mesh. This summer she hadn't been out there once, even though they had begun to build a dance hall on stilts out over the muddy, shallow lake. The owners had imported alligators from the Everglades to stock Lake Pinchona, both for picturesque effect and in order to discourage bathers from swimming anyplace other than the easily policed concrete pool.

This summer of 1922 was given over to Zaddie Sapp. Grace was entranced by Zaddie. Grace worshipped the thirteen-year-old black girl and everything about her. Grace followed Zaddie around all day, and would scarcely let the black girl out of her sight. In the morning, she would help Zaddie rake in those portions of the yard invisible to Mary-Love's windows; Mary-Love didn't approve of Grace's helping servants. When Zaddie finished her work, Grace would go over to Elinor's house and

Roxie, on temporary loan from James, would fix them dinner. Grace thought it a huge privilege to be allowed to eat in the kitchen with Roxie and Zaddie, and scorned a place at the dining room table with Elinor and Oscar. After dinner, Oscar gave each of the girls a quarter and told them to go down to the Ben Franklin and pick out whatever they wanted. The girls walked downtown hand in hand and roamed the aisles of the dime store. They pointed at everything and looked at everything with such intensity that they grew more familiar with the stock than the man who owned the store. Each purchased three small items with that quarter and tumbled them together in one sack. At home they took out their purchases and examined them minutely. Trading them back and forth, they wrapped the best one in colored paper and presented it to the other, and finally laid them all away with another hundred similar fragile happinesses in a hinged wooden box on the back porch of Elinor's house.

This unscreened porch, which was long and high-ceilinged and always shadowy and cool even in the hottest weather, was called the lattice, because of its crisscrossed woodwork. Like the rest of the house, it was raised high above the level of the yard outside, so that the infrequent breezes blew beneath it and through it. One of the windows of Zaddie's tiny room opened onto this lattice. The children could crawl in and out, with the aid of Zaddie's cot on one side and an old broken chair on the other.

On this cool lattice Zaddie and Grace invented, perfected, and played a hundred different games, the complex rules of which pertained only to themselves and to the geography and furnishings of the lattice itself. Grace took so many meals there, and spent so much time with Zaddie, that Mary-Love began to complain to James that Grace had moved in to Elinor's, was bothering Elinor, and was always waking up Frances. How she could know this, when there was virtually no communication between the households, Mary-Love did not explain. James simply said, "Grace is still lonely with her mama dead, and I am not about to interfere in anything that makes her happy."

That her niece should find such profound pleasure in the company of a thirteen-year-old black girl—and, more to the point, always within the precincts of Elinor's house—was a slap in Mary-Love's face. She decided, without saying anything more to James, to wreck Grace's perfection of happiness. Grace would learn that she, Mary-Love, was the source of all felicity within the Caskey family.

. . .

Tom and Caroline DeBordenave had two children. The elder was a girl, fifteen, pretty, popular, and smart. Her name was Elizabeth Ann. The boy, four years younger, was called John Robert, and he was a problem. John Robert was thought fortunate to have been born into a family who would always be able to take care of him, for it was obvious he would never be able to take care of himself. He was a sweet, quiet child, but simple. In school, he was three grades behind, which is to say that he generally spent two years in any one grade, and even so he was always far behind his classmates. Promotions were granted not because he deserved them, but because it would have been cruel to keep him back longer. He sat at the back of the room, and was allowed to draw on tablets throughout the school day, no matter what the rest of the class did. He wasn't called on to answer questions or to read aloud, and when the others took tests, John Robert turned over the page of his tablet, bent down over it, and pretended that he too was in the way of being examined. At recess, John Robert didn't play organized games with the boys because he never quite managed to get the rules straight in his clouded mind, and he hadn't the coordination to jump rope with the girls. Every morning, however, Caroline DeBordenave filled his pockets with candy, and for a few minutes at the beginning of morning recess John Robert was very popular. Boys and girls surrounded him, tickled him, called out his name, and rifled his pockets until there was not a single piece of candy left. Then all the children went away to their games, and John Robert sat sighing on the bench next to his teacher, or on favored days, beat erasers against the side of the building until he and the bricks were white with chalk dust.

In school John Robert was happy, for if he didn't participate in the activities of his bustling schoolmates, the crackling industry of study and play surrounded him constantly. If he might sometimes be lonely, he was never alone. In the summers, however, no one thought of him. His mother still filled his pockets with candy, but that weight dragged on him through the day. By suppertime, the chocolate and the peppermint had melted into one sticky and unappetizing mass. Elizabeth Ann sometimes read to him. She rocked in a chair on the front porch, while he stood beside her with his elbow on the arm so that one whole side of his body moved up and down with the motion. Elizabeth Ann's voice was comfortingly near, but the meaning of the words she read was far away from John Robert.

He was lonelier this summer than ever before. Elizabeth Ann had been given a bicycle for Christmas and every day rode out to Lake Pinchona and took lessons in diving from a boy who was old enough to join the army. She also fed the monkey, and sometimes leaned out the windows of the dance hall and dropped hunks of stale bread down among the blooming water lilies below, hoping to attract the notice of the alligator that swam lazily among the pilings.

But John Robert wasn't permitted to ride a bicycle for fear he would be run down, and he wasn't allowed to go to Lake Pinchona for fear he would fall into the swimming pool and drown or lean too far out the dance hall window and drop down among the lily pads, where the alligator waited for choicer morsels than Elizabeth Ann's stale bread. So John Robert sat on the front steps of his house blinking at the sun, with his pockets filled with melting candy, forever in disappointed expectation of some child running up, calling his name, tickling his ribs, and rifling his pockets.

One day Mary-Love Caskey telephoned Caroline DeBordenave and said, "Caroline, your little boy is lonely. I see him sitting for hours and hours on your front steps, lonesome as an old country graveyard. I am gone send James's Grace over there and keep that child company."

"I wish you would," sighed Caroline. "John Robert doesn't know what to do without school. The summer takes the heart right out of John Robert. Some people are just sensitive to heat, I suppose." Caroline DeBordenave's way of dealing with John Robert's mental infirmity was not to deal with it at all, outwardly. She would attribute his silence, his vacancy, his manifold incapacities to anything but an incurably feeble intellect. But even if she always seemed to deny her son's handicaps, there was a reason that she filled his pockets with candy every day.

So the next morning, just as Grace and Zaddie were beginning their day's elaborate games on Elinor's lattice, the telephone rang in the house, and Elinor appeared a minute later and said, "Grace, Miss Mary-Love wants you over at her house right away."

And Grace went—in a sort of perplexed daze, for it wasn't easy to remember the last time she had been so summoned. Mary-Love sat in the front parlor, and of all surprising things to see on the sofa beside her, there sat John Robert DeBordenave in a new yellow playsuit with half a dozen sticks of peppermint candy protruding from the breast pocket.

“Grace,” said Mary-Love, “here is John Robert who I have invited over here to play with you.”

“Ma’am?”

“You and John Robert are gone have a good time for the whole summer, I know it.”

Grace looked with some misgiving at John Robert, who was smiling timidly and alternately picking first at a button and then at a scab on his knee, about to dislodge both.

“You don’t seem to have the little friends around this summer that you had last summer, Grace, and when I mentioned that to Caroline DeBordenave, she said to me, ‘Goodness gracious! John Robert is all alone, too.’ So Caroline and I have decided that you and John Robert are gone spend the rest of your summer together. You will have such fun!”

Grace began to understand. “I *have* friends,” she protested. “I have Zaddie!”

“Zaddie is a little colored girl,” Mary-Love pointed out. “It’s all right to play with Zaddie, but she’s not your real friend. John Robert can be your *real* little friend.”

Grace thought she began to detect some small piece of injustice here, but before she could put her finger upon what it was exactly, Mary-Love went on: “Now I want you two to go and start playing together. I’ll send Ivey to get you when it’s time to eat. You and John Robert are gone have dinner with me every day.”

It wasn’t that Grace disliked John Robert. She felt sorry for him, and always in school went out of her way to be nice to him, always asking permission before she ransacked his pockets for candy. He was a boy, though, and his mind wasn’t right. She would never love John Robert DeBordenave the way that she loved Zaddie Sapp.

“All right, Aunt Mary-Love,” said Grace slyly, “I’ll take John-Robert over to Elinor’s and we’ll play on the lattice.”

“No, you won’t,” said Mary-Love. “You can play in this house or you can play in John Robert’s house. You cain’t play in Elinor’s house because I don’t want you bothering Elinor and I don’t want you bothering Elinor’s baby.”

“Well, can we play in *my* house?”

“May we play,” corrected Mary-Love. “No, you may not. There is nobody to watch you over there.”

“I don’t *need* to be watched!”

Mary-Love sat silent and glanced at John Robert. Grace understood perfectly well what that silence and that glance meant, but she refused to be drawn into her aunt’s conspiracy.

“All right, ma’am,” said Grace sullenly, “but I got to go tell Zaddie I’m not coming back this morning.”

“No, you don’t,” said Mary-Love. “There is no reason for you to explain yourself to a little colored girl who is hired to do something else besides play on a lattice porch all summer long. So, John Robert, what do you think you and Grace would like to do *this* morning?”

John Robert looked about the parlor astonished, realizing for the first time—and still dimly—that the new playsuit, this enforced visit, Grace’s presence, and the conversation between her and Miss Mary-Love, all had something to do with him.

. . .

Mary-Love could have broken up Zaddie and Grace’s friendship that summer if she had mounted a campaign of eternal vigilance, but she hadn’t the time or the inclination for such warfare. She chose, rather, to imagine that she had crushed the enemy in a single blow, but Mary-Love did not take into account the depth of Grace’s attachment to Zaddie. Grace found ways around Mary-Love’s prohibition against having anything to do with the black girl, and ways to make the eternal presence of John Robert DeBordenave less onerous.

First, Grace went to Elinor and told her what had happened. Elinor said nothing at first, but by the expression on her face, her sympathies clearly lay with Grace and Zaddie. “You can come over here as much as you want this summer, Grace,” said Elinor. “And you bring the DeBordenave boy over here too. Though I must say that I think it is a mistake for Caroline DeBordenave to give a ten-year-old girl charge of her child, who is *not* right in the head.”

So Grace’s afternoons with Zaddie continued, but they were no longer perfect, because of the presence of John Robert DeBordenave. Previously both girls had been good to John Robert, and on several occasions Zaddie had been called over to the DeBordenaves’ to watch him on Monday afternoons when Caroline was at bridge. Now, however, the two girls grew to resent John Robert because his company was forced upon them every day—and for so many hours. His conversational ability was limited almost

entirely to pantomimic actions and an occasional word, which he always had to repeat at least three times before he could be understood. And he hadn't the remotest notion of what Zaddie and Grace's complex games were all about, but would blunderingly attempt to join in all the same. From resentment, there was only a short step to cruelty.

Grace began to taunt the boy. John Robert didn't exactly understand taunts, but he could sense the contempt behind them. Grace would take candy from his pockets, shove it into his mouth, and force him to swallow it whole. She deliberately spilled milk and iced tea on his new clothes, and then cried, "You are so clumsy, John Robert DeBordenave!" If he broke any of her Ben Franklin treasures—as he tended to do if he so much as picked one up—Grace would snatch the pieces away from him and then fling them in his face. She would never say, 'It's all right, you couldn't help it,' when he began to weep large silent tears. Grace ignored the infirmity that crippled the child and saw only his exasperating slowness. She took note only of his inhibiting presence, and thought of him only as the instrument by which Mary-Love sought to separate her and Zaddie. If Grace was ashamed of her cruelties at all, she laid the blame at Mary-Love's door.

One day when John Robert was standing in the open door of the lattice staring out at the Perdido, Grace, without a thought to the consequences, ran up from behind and shoved him down the steps.

He tumbled over and over, banging his head on the sharp corner of the bottom step. When Grace ran down and lifted his head, blood dripped from the wound and filled a groove in the patterned sand below.

Elinor, alerted to the accident by Grace's hysterical screams, called Dr. Benquith. John Robert was brought back to consciousness, examined, bandaged, and carried home by Bray. Grace ran along behind Bray, explaining tearfully, "He fell. He fell down the back steps and rolled all the way to the bottom!"

Grace was certain everyone knew that she had pushed John Robert. But her aunt said only, "How could you have let it happen? Why weren't you watching? You know that boy doesn't have sense enough to come in out of the rain!"

At first, Grace was relieved that her culpability had not been found out; it was better to be charged merely with neglect of duty than with murder. But as the days passed, Grace came to see that, because she had not been charged with the crime, she must bear all the guilt within herself. She

was morose and downcast; her appetite was gone and her sleep was racked with nightmares. James worried about her. Mary-Love said, "She *ought* to feel guilty—that boy could have died! How would she have felt then? How would *we* have felt?"

Elinor called Grace to her one afternoon. Elinor sat in a swing on the upstairs porch, stood Grace before her, and said, "You feel real bad about John Robert, don't you?"

Grace nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am. Is he gone die?"

"Of course not! Who told you that?"

"Aunt Mary-Love said he might. She said it would be my fault if he did!"

Elinor bit her lip for a moment, glanced over Grace's shoulder at Mary-Love's house, and then said, "John Robert is not going to die, and even if he did, it still wouldn't be your fault. You understand me, Grace?"

Grace trembled and bit *her* lip, then suddenly burst into tears and plunged her head into Elinor's lap. "It would be, it would be!" wailed Grace. "I pushed him!"

"Oh..." said Elinor slowly. "I see..."

Without removing Grace's head from her lap, Elinor moved the child around and drew her up into the swing beside her. Grace cried for a few minutes more, then sat up, red-eyed.

"All right, tell me what happened," said Elinor, and Grace told her.

"And you don't know why you did it?" Elinor asked when Grace had finished her description of the event.

"No, ma'am, 'cause I like old John Robert. I just didn't like having to take care of him all the time. Sometimes Zaddie and I just wanted to be by ourselves!"

Grace sat beside Elinor a long while, now feeling a great deal better for her confession. When at last Elinor drew apart and stood up, she said, "Grace, I'm going to speak to Caroline DeBordenave for a few minutes."

"You gone tell her I pushed John Robert?" cried Grace in a frenzy of terror and guilt.

"No," said Elinor. "I'm going to tell her that it was *not* your fault that John Robert fell down the back steps, that we were all sorry it happened, but that you had no business being a nursemaid for John Robert for the entire summer. You are too young to have that kind of responsibility. If she had wanted John Robert watched every minute of the day, then she should

have hired a colored girl to do it. That's what I will say, and I will tell her how bad you feel—even though it *wasn't* your fault—and that you want permission to go visit John Robert and ask him how he's feeling. You do, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am!" cried Grace vehemently, and meant it.

. . .

Caroline DeBordenave understood all that Elinor said, and agreed with her. "Lord, Elinor, when Bray brought John Robert home and I saw all that blood I was just about out of my mind! I didn't mean to slam the door in poor old Grace's face, it's just that I wasn't thinking straight. John Robert means more to Tom and me than anything else in the world. If anything happened to that boy, I don't know what we'd do. I suppose we would pack up and move away. I don't think either one of us would have the heart to stay behind."

Grace and Zaddie were no longer forced to bear the company and responsibility of John Robert DeBordenave. Mary-Love's scheme, undermined by Elinor's interference, came to nothing.

Chapter 19

The Heart, the Words, the Steel, and the Smoke

Sister wondered, that summer, how she could have been so foolish as to allow Ivey Sapp to cast a spell upon her and upon Early Haskew. Sister remembered with shuddering embarrassment how she had walked around the kitchen table with a bleeding chicken heart in her hand, and how she had spoken words over it, how she had skewered it, how she had thrown it into the fire. She prayed no one ever found out how silly she had been. Now, when she brought that scene to mind, her recollection involuntarily saw a row of human heads in the window of the kitchen; the heads had eyes that watched her movements, ears that heard her words, and mouths that would spread the humiliating story all over town. Yet nothing happened. Even her most suspicious inquiry could detect no knowledge of the business in the faces that passed her on the street or in the voices that greeted her each day. The mound beside the back steps, beneath which the remains of the sacrificed chicken were buried, had been beaten down by the rain and one could no longer tell where it had been.

If Sister felt relief that her foolishness had not been discovered, she was also chagrined to find that the spell so far hadn't seemed to have had any effect. When she was alone in the house with Early, Sister sat in a good dress on the best sofa in the usually closed front parlor, conspicuously ready to accept a proposal of marriage. Early would only pass by and say, "Good Lord, Sister, aren't you burning up in there?"

Sister would sigh, get up from the sofa, and close the parlor doors, then go upstairs and change into something that was less appropriate for a proposal, but more comfortable for the weather. She decided, after several repetitions of this, that a man as straightforward as Early Haskew wasn't to be caught only by spells and stratagems. Sister realized she could not just simply put herself in the way of being asked; she would have to press the matter. If she hadn't much experience in dealing with men, well, then, Early Haskew—who had always lived with *his* mother—probably hadn't had much opportunity to deal with young women. She doubted whether he had ever proposed to anyone, and if he had not, why should she assume that he would recognize, when she displayed it, the proper attitude of availability?

Thereafter, whenever Early was in his sitting room working on the plans for the levee, Sister loitered there, and made no attempt to cover the fact that she *was* loitering. If Early went out to inspect a riverbank or talk to someone whose shed would be moved or examine a vein of clay out in the forest, Sister begged permission to come along with him.

"It's just gone be boring, Sister!" he'd exclaim.

Sister would reply, without a trace of a simper, "Lord, Early, I just like being with you!"

This tactic began to work. Soon she didn't bother to ask. When she saw him going out the door and climbing into the automobile, she would hop right into the back seat and say, "Where we going today? Who we gone speak to, Early?"

If it happened that Sister was in another part of the house and didn't see him go out the door, Early would linger in front of the car, and when Sister appeared at a window he would call out: "Hey, Sister, you holding me up!"

. . .

"You are bothering Early, Sister," said Mary-Love every evening at the supper table, quite as if Early were not sitting at her right hand.

"If Early doesn't want me trailing along behind him," said Sister, "then Early ought to tell me to stay at home."

"Sister's good help to me, Miz Caskey."

"How? How? I'd like to know."

"Well, she writes down my figures for me. She carries along a little notebook, and that frees me up. And she knows the people, too. Sister, I bet you know everybody in this town! We get over there in Baptist Bottom, I'm gone need some help. The way those colored people speak, hard sometimes for me to understand what they're talking about—in Pine Cone, colored people speak totally different—and I need Sister there to tell me what they've been saying to me."

"Sister is a drag on your work, Early," said Mary-Love, who had begun to see what was happening, and had set about to head it off before anything serious came of it.

So every evening Mary-Love objected to how much trouble Sister was for Early, and always dismissed his protestations to the contrary as mere politeness. And every evening she demanded that Sister leave the man alone for thirty minutes at least, but Sister merely shrugged and said, "Mama, I'm

doing what I want to do because I'm happy doing it. So don't expect me to leave off just because it's what you want." Mary-Love thought about asking Early to leave the house altogether, but for several reasons she couldn't bring herself to do so. For one thing she had begged him to come, and the whole town knew it and he had probably even kept the two letters that she had written to him so she couldn't ask him to leave now without risking a severe ebbing of her reputation. He also remained a goad in the side of Elinor Caskey next door, and Mary-Love wouldn't have removed that goad for the world. At last she decided to give up any further subversion, trusting that Sister's bumbling inexperience would soon sink this matter-of-fact romance. Still, Mary-Love had nagging worries that some kind of attachment might be growing between her daughter and the engineer.

. . .

And indeed the day soon came that Mary-Love had feared and Sister had hoped for—when Sister was proven to be right and Mary-Love was shown to be wrong.

It was a particularly hot day in August. Sister and Early had driven far out into the country, over toward Dixie Landing on the Alabama River to a clay quarry that was of interest to Early. He and Sister had left Bray with the automobile at the single store at Dixie Landing. With sandwiches and a bottle of milk in a basket, they set out along a faint track in the pine forest. They found the quarry, and as Sister sat on a tolerably clean outcropping of sandstone Early climbed all about the pit, getting himself quite red and dusty in the process. "It won't do," was his judgment.

After this inspection, instead of returning directly to the car, they climbed over the lip of the quarry and went down the other side to Brickyard Lake. This was a wide shallow depression of blue water in a vast green pasture in sight of the wide gray Alabama River. In contrast to the river they saw before them, and in contrast to the rivers that wound through Perdido, the water of Brickyard Lake was extraordinarily blue and beautiful. There was a solitary clump of cypress on the near margin of the lake, and as Sister and Early made their way down to it, intending to picnic in its shade, they discovered first that the ground was too soggy to allow pleasant picnicking, and second that there was a little boat, with two oars inside, tethered to a tree. As was the custom in that part of Alabama, they requisitioned the craft for their own pleasure.

"I made cookies, too," said Sister, as she climbed into the boat.

Early rowed out toward the center of the lake. A kingfisher screeched in the branches of the cypress, and then swooped down into the water not twenty feet from them.

"Do I snore?" asked Early suddenly, after they had glided along several minutes in silence.

"You sure do," replied Sister energetically.

"Mama used to say I did. Does it keep you awake, though?"

"Sometimes," said Sister. "But I don't mind. I can always take a nap if I'm tired in the afternoon."

"You're at the other end of the hall."

"Yes," said Sister, unwrapping a sandwich for him and reaching forward with it. "But, Early, once you get going, you are pretty loud."

He set the oars behind him and took the sandwich. He ate it so quickly that he was finished before Sister had even taken the first bite out of hers.

"I was starved."

"You should have said something. We didn't have to wait."

"But what if you were in the same room?"

Sister's mouth was full. She cocked her head, to indicate *What?*

"If we were in the same room," said Early, "you wouldn't be able to sleep at all because of my snoring." He seemed troubled by this thought.

Sister continued to eat her sandwich.

"So you wouldn't, would you?" asked Early, casting down his eyes.

"Wouldn't what?"

"Wouldn't want to get married?"

Sister gobbled up the last of her sandwich. "Early Haskew, is that what you have been going on about?"

"Yes, what'd you think?"

"I couldn't begin to imagine. Who cares if you snore? Daddy used to snore all the time. And he's been dead twenty years. What I mean is, it obviously didn't hurt Mama any, since she's outlived him that long."

"So you will think about marrying me? Sister, you got another sandwich?" Pleasure and happy expectation appeared to increase Early's appetite.

Sister reached in her basket and brought out another. "On one condition," she said.

"What's that?"

"That we don't live with Mama."

“Is that why you would say yes to marrying me, to get away from Miss Mary-Love? Miss Mary-Love has been very good to me.”

“Miss Mary-Love is not your mama. Early, I am gone marry you because I am in *love* with you, and for no other reason in the world. Except that it would give me a good deal of satisfaction to leave Mama high and dry.”

Early Haskew put the oars of the boat back in the water and rowed around the edge of Brickyard Lake three times. He would have done it again but Sister reminded him that Bray was probably starting to get nervous.

In the course of the walk from the lake back to Dixie Landing, Sister smiled a secret smile of pride that she had engineered the engagement herself, without the help of Ivey and Ivey’s spell-casting. She regretted that she had ever so much doubted her own power as to have gone to Ivey in the first place.

Then her smile of pride faded. Sister saw that, after a manner, the spell *had* worked. Ivey had sacrificed a chicken and torn out its heart. Sister had spoken words over that heart, pierced it five times with steel, and had inhaled the smoke of its burning. Now she was engaged to Early Haskew. There was no way that she could bestow all the credit on herself.

It could have been the heart of that hen—and the steel and the words and the burning smoke—that accomplished the deed.

How could she ever know for certain?

Chapter 20

Queenie

Early intended to tell Mary-Love Caskey that very evening of his engagement to her daughter, but Sister cautioned against this course. “Mama’s gone make trouble, or at least she’s gone try.”

“Why?” asked Early simply. “I thought your mama liked me.”

“Of course she does. But not in the person of a son-in-law. Mama wouldn’t approve of my intended if he was the King of the Jews dropped down on the front steps with a shoebox full of diamonds. Mama is not gone want to let me go, that’s all.”

“Sister, I don’t mind trouble. I can stand up to your mama.”

They were still making their way through the woods from Brickyard Lake toward the Landing, where Bray waited with the automobile. They had spent hours on the water in their borrowed boat and now the sun was in its decline. The woods were shadowed, but the sunlight now and then broke through the tops of the trees and blinded them for a moment as they walked along hand in hand.

“Of course you can, Early. That’s not the point. I’m thinking about the levee.”

“How you mean?”

“I mean, I think you ought to finish off all your plans and get everything set before we tell Mama anything. ’Cause there’s bound to be trouble, and if there’s trouble, then you won’t get your work done like you should. Besides, you couldn’t rightly go away on a honeymoon with me if you hadn’t finished what you had set out to do, could you?”

“I could not,” said Early stoutly, proud that his fiancée should see the thing in so responsible, practical, and—when it came down to it—so *masculine* a perspective.

For a time nothing was said. Sister told Ivey of the engagement. To Sister’s relief Ivey said only, “I’m so happy for you, Sister!” and made no mention of the buried chicken. Everything continued as before, except that Sister, having reached her goal, spent less time with Early. Mary-Love grew complacent, and imagined a cooling between the two. Sister, she thought, had at last been discouraged by Early’s inattentiveness to her.

Early was working harder, knowing that when he had completed the plans he would have not only the cash bonus promised by James Caskey, but Sister's hand in marriage. From the back pages of a periodical he purchased at the pharmacy he cut out an advertisement and sent away for a patented guaranteed cure for snoring. Every day he expectantly awaited its arrival. He once had heard his mother say that she had almost abandoned his father on account of his nocturnal wheezings and snufflings, and he had no wish to take any such chances with Sister when they should share the same bed.

Summer gradually and grudgingly gave way to autumn. Across the Caskey property the wind blew sometimes chill and damp across the Perdido, but the leathery leaves of the water oaks remained in place on the twigs and branches of the ever-taller trees. Moss grew on the trunks, and tiny stunted ferns sprouted in the crotches of the roots, and Zaddie in a long woolen sweater went out early every morning and raked patterns in the sand.

. . .

On an afternoon in the early part of October, Bray appeared in James Caskey's office, and said, "Mr. James, Miss Mary-Love wants you home right now."

"Bray, I'm coming," said James, and he got up from his desk and walked out of the office without a moment's hesitation. The last time his presence had been so commanded was the afternoon that Elinor had sent his wife away to her death.

"What is it?" said James as he got into the car.

"I don't know," said Bray, who knew perfectly well, but whose instructions had been to say nothing. James understood this, and asked no more questions, although he was very much disturbed. When Bray drew up before Mary-Love's house, James ran up to the front porch, wondering if Grace had been hit on the head with a falling timber in the collapse of her schoolroom roof.

"James!" said Mary-Love in her most musical tone. "We're out here on the porch!"

James stopped dead. Mary-Love's voice bore no hint whatever of disaster, yet there was something in its sweetness, coupled with his summons from the mill and the directive to Bray to say nothing to him, that

put James on his guard, as if Mary-Love had called out, *Hurry up, James! The most awful thing has happened!*

He slowly mounted the steps, then opened the screened door on to the porch. It was more crowded than usual: Mary-Love sat on the glider with Early Haskew next to her. Sister was on the swing with a little girl beside her. And on the other glider, the one with the chenille blanket thrown over it, sat James's sister-in-law Queenie Strickland and Queenie's son, Malcolm. Malcolm was picking the threads out of a chenille rose. James had not seen any of the Stricklands since his wife's funeral.

"James, I'm so glad you could get away," said Mary-Love. "Queenie came all the way from Nashville to see us!"

Queenie Strickland, who was short and dimpled with bobbed hair that was dyed a shiny black, jumped up and barreled her way toward James, crying out, "Oh, Lord, James Caskey, don't you miss her!"

"I do, I—" But he could say no more, for Queenie had grabbed him around his narrow waist and squeezed the breath right out of him.

"Genevieve was the light of my life! I am miserable without her! I came down to see if you were dead of grief yet!" She released James for a moment and pointed to the glider. "You remember my boy, Malcolm, he was prostrated at his aunt's funeral, say hello to James Caskey, your sweet uncle, boy!"

"Hey, Uncle James," said Malcolm sullenly, and managed at that moment to pick a hole through the chenille spread with his thumbnail.

"And that's my preciousest girl, Lucille, who came down with mumps on the day our darling died and wanted something desperate to come to the funeral but I wouldn't let her even though I had to put her in the hospital in order to get down here in time and one nurse told me she had never heard a child carry on the way that child carried on 'cause she couldn't come to her Aunt Genevieve's funeral!"

Lucille appeared to be about three years old, so she could not have been more than two when Genevieve died. That seemed very young to show such a great interest in the obsequies of even one's closest relatives. However, as if on cue, Lucille burst into tears in the swing, and pulled away with beating fists when Sister attempted to put an arm around her for comfort.

James drew back from Queenie, who had lifted her short arms with the apparent intention of embracing him again. He felt distinctly as if he had

fallen into a trap. He looked from Queenie to Mary-Love, as if wondering which of them had been responsible for laying this snare in his unobservant path.

"Well, Queenie," said James after a moment, "did Carl come down here with you?"

Queenie clapped the flat of her hand against her breast, as if to still the sudden beating of her injured heart.

"You have wounded me in speaking of that man!" cried Queenie, staggering backward and waving her other hand carefully behind her to make certain she did not trip over anything.

James stood very still, and was almost certain that he had just stepped into a second pitfall.

Queenie staggered all the way back to the glider, and fell into it heavily. She sat on Malcolm's hand, causing the boy to squeal. He made a great show of his difficulty in extricating his hand from beneath his mother's bulk, then wiggled his fingers to see if they were broken. When he judged them whole, he bunched them into a fist and punched his mother's thigh, but she took no notice at all.

"Mr. Haskew," cried Queenie, "I am sorry!"

"It's all right," said Early automatically, though neither he nor anyone else had any idea why Queenie Strickland should beg his pardon.

"You are not family," said Queenie in explanation. "You should not be burdened with the Strickland family troubles."

"You want me to go inside?" said Early amiably, already getting to his feet.

"You sit down," said Mary-Love in a low voice. Then she said more loudly, "Miz Strickland, if you are gone talk family trouble, then I would suggest that you send away these children. I don't particularly want to hear Strickland family tribulations myself, but I certainly don't feel they are fit for the ears of your little boy and your little girl."

"I will not!" cried Queenie. "These children know as much as I do! They have suffered as I have suffered! Has your father beat you, Malcolm Strickland?" she said, turning to her son as if in cross-examination.

"I'll beat him!" cried Malcolm belligerently, and he punched his mother's thigh again.

"Has he touched your pretty angel face, Lucille Strickland?" said Queenie.

Queenie's daughter, who had only just subsided from her previous eruption, suddenly threw her hands up to her face and burst once more into loud sobbing. Sister attempted to draw her hands away, but Lucille wailed so loudly that Sister allowed the tiny hands to snap back into position, so that at least the cries were muffled.

"Carl Strickland," said Queenie in a low, awful voice, "laid his hands on my body. My dress covers the bruises. I would not have you see them for the world. If I had stayed with that man, people in Nashville would have held my name dog-cheap. I will reveal to y'all the greatest mistake that I ever made in my entire life. I will say it out to you, even though there is one of you here who is of no relation whatsoever..." Here she gazed at Early Haskew, and then glanced over the porch in a general sort of way. *"I got into the wrong pew with that man."*

The Caskeys were uncomfortable. Sister would not look at Queenie Strickland, but stared instead at the little girl sitting beside her. Occasionally she attempted to whisper a word or two of consolation. Mary-Love sat stolidly with her arms crossed over her breast and stared at Queenie as if in disbelief that a civilized woman should so disgrace herself. Now and then she glanced up at James reproachfully as if the whole business were his fault. She rather considered that it was, for it was through his marriage that the Caskeys were connected with such a woman as Queenie Strickland. James stood exactly as he stood when he had first stepped onto the porch. He did not know what to do and had no idea what to say and was cognizant of every thought going through Mary-Love's head. In his heart he agreed with her—it was all his fault. All that he might do then was to get the business over with as quickly as possible.

"So you've left Carl, is that what you're saying, Queenie?"

"Of course!" cried Queenie, rising to her feet and apparently preparing to rush James once more. He held up his hands and waved her down again. She fell back onto the glider, but not before Malcolm had another opportunity deliberately to stick his hand beneath her so that he again might have the pleasure of squealing and of administering another punch to his mother's thigh. "Did you want me to stay with him?" cried Queenie. "Did you want to see me beat down into the ground by that devil-man's heavy hand?"

"Oh, Ma, I'd beat him!" cried Malcolm, now administering a volley of illustrative punches against his mother's leg.

“Well,” said James, after a moment’s thought, “where *is* Carl?”

“Is Carl Strickland in Nashville?” cried Queenie wildly, jumping up and down on the glider. “Do I know? He may be. He may not be. Does Carl Strickland know where *I* am is a better question. He does not. Or if he does, *I* am not the one who told him. I put my bags and my darlings in the back seat of a car and I drove directly to Perdido, Alabama, without a license or ten dollars to my name.”

Sister looked up quickly at this mention of money.

Queenie was suddenly quiet. She looked around the porch and when she continued her manner was greatly subdued.

“Do I have a place to go? is another question you might well ask, James Caskey. And what would the answer be, Malcolm Strickland? Would the answer be ‘yes’? No, it wouldn’t. Would the answer be ‘no,’ Lucille Strickland? Yes, it would. The Stricklands—except Carl Strickland—are without a roof for their heads. Their automobile is broken down in front of the Perdido town hall, blocking traffic, and will never move again. The Stricklands—except Carl Strickland—don’t have the ready cash to purchase themselves a box of rotten apples sold by a colored boy on the side of the highway.”

James Caskey collapsed onto the glider between Early Haskew and Mary-Love. For several moments no one said anything, and all that could be heard was the sobbing of Lucille, which had begun anew when her mother had addressed her with the rhetorical question. Ivey Sapp could be seen through the kitchen window that looked out onto the porch, unabashedly watching all that was happening.

“Why exactly did you come to Perdido, Miz Strickland?” asked Mary-Love in a cold voice.

“You have *got* to call me Queenie! You just *got* to! I came to Perdido because of James. I don’t have any family. I had Genevieve, and she was all. We were Snyders. All the Snyders are dead. Except my brother Pony Snyder. Pony went to Oklahoma. Married an Indian girl. My darlings here have got fifteen, twenty little Indian cousins now, I hear. But I couldn’t go live with Pony. They don’t have anything. I don’t even know what his Indian wife’s first name is. Would I raise my darlings on an Indian reservation?”

“I’d shoot ’em, Ma!” cried Malcolm.

“I know you would, darling,” said Queenie indulgently, brushing her son’s hair with an affectionate hand. “But I was thinking about all those times my sweet sister stayed with me, and I’d say to her, ‘Genevieve Snyder’—I never did get used to her married name, and I guess I’ll always think of her as a Snyder—‘why are you staying here with me when you’ve got the best husband in all the world pining away for you down in Perdido? Why aren’t you with him?’ And she’d say, ‘I don’t know, ’cause you’re right, he’s the best man in all the world, he’d do anything for me or for you or for your children. I guess I just love Nashville too much for my own good.’ That was her problem, she loved Nashville. I never saw a girl take to a city the way Genevieve took to Nashville. She couldn’t be happy anywhere else in the world, I guess. So she told me if anything ever happened and I needed help to come down here and speak to her husband James Caskey, and when something happened—something truly awful—I got in my car and here I am.”

. . .

Though patently meretricious, Queenie Strickland’s speech achieved its desired effect. James Caskey was persuaded to assist her and her children. Their meager baggage was carried into his house by Bray, and later in the afternoon Grace Caskey was introduced to her younger cousins. By way of greeting, Lucille smeared chocolate onto Grace’s dress and Malcolm punched her in the stomach.

For the first time in a long while James had dinner served at his own table instead of eating at Mary-Love’s. Roxie came back from Elinor’s for the evening to cook for them. James had no wish to inflict Queenie and Malcolm and Lucille on the rest of his family. He even took the precaution of sending Grace next door to Mary-Love’s, and Mary-Love promised Grace that she could stay for as long as those awful people remained with her father. Over the meal, James said to Queenie, “You sure you want to stay in Perdido? You really think the three of you could be happy here? Here where you don’t know anybody?”

“Well, we know you, James Caskey. Who else do we have to know? And now we have been properly introduced to the main part of your family, even though I counted more of ’em at the funeral, I’ll probably get to meet ’em all in time, so who else could I want? Lucille and Malcolm are happy as pipers.”

Lucille and Malcolm drummed their heels against the rungs of their chairs.

"All right," said James Caskey wearily, regretting that he had ever mourned his loneliness in that house, "then tomorrow I will start looking out a place for you to live."

"A place?" cried Queenie, swiveling her head all around, but managing to keep her eye firmly on the gravy boat that she was tilting over her rice. "What is wrong with right here? You have room—all the room in the world! We could have moved our whole entire house inside your front parlor, James Caskey—that's how much room *you* have."

James thought he caught the glint of another trap hidden in the fallen leaves in his path. He stopped stock-still, looked about for alternate routes, and at last said quietly, "No, Queenie."

"James Caskey, you—"

"I will look you out a place to live. I will pay for it, and I will take care of you—within certain limits—for Genevieve's sake. But I cannot let you stay in this house with Grace and me."

"You are lonely!" cried Queenie. James realized, in something of a panic, that he could see a very large trap indeed, just a little farther on in the forest.

"I have Grace!"

"Your darling girl is a tiny child! She cannot keep you company the way I could! We could be a happy family. You have lost your wife—my darling Genevieve—and I have lost a husband, that heathen rapscallion Carl Strickland, I'm ashamed to bear his stinking name! I'm ashamed to have my darlings wear it through life! It's my one comfort—"

"Queenie," said James, interrupting, "you can stay here tonight. But tomorrow I will find someplace else for you to live."

"James Caskey, I know why you are doing this. I know why you are turning me out of your home."

"Why?" he asked, very much puzzled.

"Because darling Malcolm broke that itty-bitty piece of glass this afternoon, he just wanted to look at it, he thought it was so pretty—I did, too. I said, 'Malcolm Strickland, put James's thing back where it belongs and don't you pick up anything in this house ever again,' and he said, 'Ma, I won't ever pick up anything of Uncle James's ever again as long as I live.' I tried to fix it, but those pieces just wouldn't all fit back together again."

James Caskey didn't have the heart to ask what had been broken, and for the next week he was reluctant even to glance at his shelves of beautiful things for fear he would discover which piece the child had destroyed.

"That's not why," he said to Queenie. "I didn't even know about...the accident."

"Ohhh! Then why did I say anything!" cried Queenie involuntarily. "James, we could be so happy!"

But James, displaying uncharacteristic fortitude, would not be persuaded, and next day he bought outright the house next to Dr. Benquith's on the sunny side of the low hill that rose up west of the town hall. It was a merciful ten-minute walk, at the least, from there to the Caskeys' houses, and Queenie was so round and roly-poly that everyone figured that she wouldn't often go to the physical exertion of making that journey. Queenie and her children slept in that house that very first night on rollaway beds appropriated from Mary-Love's storage rooms.

Mary-Love, once she was convinced that James had accepted the blame for having lured Queenie Strickland to Perdido, set out to make the situation as easy as possible for him. She saw to the furniture in one day's shopping in Mobile, thus demonstrating, if anyone had ever doubted, the extent of her procrastination in obtaining the furnishings for Oscar and Elinor's house.

James introduced Oscar and Elinor to Queenie and her children. Something in Elinor's manner, or in her eyes, cowed even Malcolm and Lucille. Malcolm didn't kick and Lucille didn't cry, although when they got home Malcolm showed his mother a bruise on his arm, claiming that Elinor had twisted the flesh there when no one was looking.

Elinor, with the aid of Roxie and Zaddie, ran up curtains for all the windows in Queenie's house, took them over, hung them up, and then went away again without accepting so much as a cup of coffee or a piece of cake for their effort.

Queenie didn't have to worry about money, for James Caskey set up small accounts for her in certain stores, and she was allowed to take away what she needed. Once, however, in Berta Hamilton's dress shop, when Queenie pointed out a long coat with a fur collar and wide fur sleeves, Berta Hamilton said pointedly, "Oh, Miz Strickland, I think that's probably not gone fit you too well..."

Queenie insisted on trying it on anyway and, contrary to the prediction, it fit perfectly, and Berta Hamilton was forced to say outright what she had only discreetly hinted at before: “I am not gone put a hundred-and-fifty-dollar coat on Mr. James’s bill when you have already spent three hundred and sixty-two dollars in here this month, Miz Strickland.”

Queenie fumed, and Queenie fretted, but Queenie went away without the coat. She began to understand what James had meant by “certain limits.”

Chapter 21

Christmas

Queenie Strickland found that Perdido was a tough nut to crack. There was no question but that she was better off than she had been in Nashville; she was being taken care of in a more agreeable way, she had a nicer house, and most importantly she had got rid of her husband, Carl. But other things weren't so quick in coming; for instance, friends and acquaintances. No woman who talked as much as Queenie Strickland could get along for any length of time without people, and she was the sort, moreover, who rather wore friends down. She needed a number of them so that she could bear down upon them one by one a little at a time; that way the abrasions she inflicted had time to heal and be forgotten. She wasted no time in building a new circle.

To Florida Benquith next door, Queenie—sweet as sweet could be—sent over a pie for the doctor and scraps for the dog. The next day she asked Florida if she wouldn't mind setting a hem for her with pins, it would only take three seconds. Florida, envious of the social power wielded by the Caskeys in the town, craftily acquiesced to become Queenie's friend. This, she calculated, would either provide a way of becoming closer with the Caskeys if Queenie ultimately proved herself acceptable to Mary-Love and the rest, or else specifically to annoy them in case Queenie turned out to be an outcast. Thus, Queenie gained a foothold, and from it began deliberately to enlarge her circle of acquaintances. For one thing, she joined the bridge group that met every Tuesday afternoon.

There were two bridge clubs in Perdido, the more fashionable convening on Monday afternoons, the other on the following day; at the second, the principal topic of conversation was what had been said, worn, and served at bridge the day before. The first group centered around Mary-Love; the second revolved around Florida Benquith. Elinor Caskey, when she left Mary-Love's house, and would no longer have anything to do with her mother-in-law, had dropped into the second group. She was rather resented there, first because she carried the greatest social weight, and second because she was a member actually by default. But through these

Tuesday afternoon gatherings, Elinor and Queenie became acquainted with each other.

In the middle of November, by the chance of the draw, the Tuesday meetings were held on successive weeks first in Elinor's house and then in Queenie's. Though accidental, this exchange of visits assumed the dimensions of a public embrace, and thereafter Queenie and Elinor were considered to be friends. This was a willful—perhaps even mischievous—misinterpretation of the circumstances on the part of Florida Benquith and her circle, but it was a misinterpretation that stuck, perhaps because neither Queenie nor Elinor did anything to deny it.

Somehow, Mary-Love heard of this, or divined it by miraculous clairvoyance, and was disturbed. Mary-Love had no liking for Queenie, either in her person or in her position as Genevieve's sister. She particularly did not like to see Queenie rollicking behind the enemy lines. She began to fear that Elinor and Queenie would join forces and launch a concerted attack against her.

Consequently, at dinner after church a few weeks later, Mary-Love said to James, "It is time to mend our fences."

James looked up from his plate, surprised. "Have you and I been arguing, Mary-Love? I sure didn't know it, if we were."

"We have not, James, but in case you haven't noticed, most of our family is not speaking."

James—and everyone else at the table—shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"It is getting close to Christmas," Mary-Love continued, quite as if she bore no responsibility for the estrangements and divisions within the family, "and I think it would be nice if we all spent it together." She paused, perhaps waiting for someone to second this motion. Finding only silence, she went on unperturbed: "We ought to do it for the children, if not for ourselves. There's Grace, of course," said Mary-Love, glancing toward her niece across the table, "she's been with us for a while, but now there's Miriam and Frances. And, Lord, they're *sisters*, and they hardly get the chance to look in each other's faces! And now we've got Malcolm and Lucille, they ought to be here—"

"You're inviting Queenie Strickland!" cried Sister in amazement. James just sat with his mouth open.

“I’m inviting the whole *family*,” said Mary-Love, rather enjoying the consternation she had caused. That she was able to surprise them so completely and to such effect was proof of her continuing power.

“And Oscar and Elinor, too?” asked James, shaking his head in wonder.

“Everybody.”

“Do you think they’ll come?” wondered Sister. “Queenie will, of course,” Sister went on, answering her own question, “and she’ll be bound to bring along those two hellions.”

“Sister!” cried Mary-Love in reproach, having never heard her daughter speak any word that even approached a curse.

“That’s exactly what they are,” Sister went on. “But, Mama, you really think you can get Elinor over here, and get her to bring Frances with her?”

“I see no reason why Elinor should not come,” said Mary-Love stiffly. “I see no reason why she should not bring her daughter with her. Of course, there is another reason why we are having a party on Christmas.”

“What is it?” asked James.

“Early says he is gone have the levee plans done next week. And I think we ought to celebrate his finishing.”

“It’s taken me a lot longer than I reckoned,” explained Early apologetically.

“But he wanted to do it right,” said Sister quickly. “And, James, your old council got its money’s worth when it hired on Early to do the job. Once he’s ready to start, that levee’ll go up like nobody’s business.”

“Well,” said James cautiously, “I’m real glad to hear it, but, Mary-Love, I don’t think you better say anything about this to Elinor. Don’t tell her she’s coming over here to a party for the building of the levee—or I can guarantee you she won’t step foot in this house.”

“You are probably right, James. Maybe if *you* invited her she’d come. Maybe if you told her I’m gone set up a big tree—the biggest tree we’ve ever had—and she can bring all her packages over here, and tell her we’ll fill the whole front parlor with presents for the children, maybe then she’d be convinced. Maybe if you could explain to her that the family ought to be together at Christmas, and maybe if you told her that Queenie’s gone be invited too it’d all make a big difference.”

“She’s friends with Queenie now?” said Sister.

Mary-Love nodded. “I’ve heard tell ...”

Sister nodded thoughtfully, suddenly understanding more about Mary-Love's motives for these invitations than Mary-Love would have liked.

Later that afternoon James went over to Elinor's and invited her and Oscar to Christmas Day at Mary-Love's. He mentioned Queenie's invitation but said nothing of Early Haskew's presence, or the fact that Early was just finishing up his plans for the levee. Elinor calmly accepted the invitation, merely remarking that she had already planned to go to Mobile to buy everyone presents. At about the same time Sister went over to Queenie's, taking with her a plate of hard candy, and extended the same invitation. Queenie desperately tried to think of a way to discuss with Elinor whether she ought to accept, but it was imperative that she say yea or nay immediately. She could not plead a prior engagement, for Sister would know that was a lie. She said yes and prayed God that she had not offended Elinor in doing so.

That evening Queenie walked over to Elinor's and conferred with her new friend upon the matter at hand. "I could say I had to go back to Nashville for something or other, and then stay locked up in the house all day," suggested Queenie with some enthusiasm, confident that the idea was so ridiculous that Elinor would never encourage her to go through with it. It had been for Elinor's sake alone that Queenie had declared an aversion to Mary-Love.

"No," said Elinor, "Oscar and I are going, and we're taking Frances, so there's no reason why you shouldn't go too, Queenie."

"I'm glad you said that," said Queenie. "'Cause it makes everything a whole lot easier for everybody."

"I *want* to go," said Elinor. "I haven't been in that house for a long while, and I think it's time that I saw what Miss Mary-Love has been up to."

. . .

In the first part of November, a draftsman from Pensacola had taken up residence in the Osceola Hotel, and worked day and night for three weeks, producing final drawings, on blueprint paper, of all Early's plans for the levee. On the day that he finished, Sister and Early took the plans home and spread them out one by one on Sister's bed, and admired them. The next day the blueprints were taken to the records office at the town hall and photographed for safety's sake. Then the following Tuesday, Early took them before the town council, along with his revised estimates of costs and

a timetable for completion of various stages of the work. To the council's satisfaction, the cost was lower than originally predicted, and if all went well, Perdido would be completely protected by an impervious, indestructible levee by the winter of 1924.

Tom DeBordenave reported what everyone on the council already knew—that the state legislature had authorized a bond issue for the construction and that the sales of these bonds would be handled through the First National Bank of Mobile. Each of the millowners had already deposited twenty-five thousand dollars in the Perdido bank, and nothing now stood in the way of the work's immediate commencement.

By unanimous consent of the council, Early Haskew was appointed principal engineer for the project, and was directed to go down to Pensacola and Mobile and up to Montgomery immediately, and to begin speaking to contractors and asking for sealed bids. The meeting closed with a prayer. With bowed head, James Caskey asked God to send no more high water before Early Haskew was finished with his work.

Early set forth immediately on his mission, and was sorely missed by Sister. But she and Mary-Love were busy with preparations for the Christmas party, the event having added to the usual amount of activity before the holiday.

There was now increased traffic between Mary-Love's and Elinor's houses. Elinor sent over a jar of strawberry preserves; this favor was returned in the form of two pounds of shelled pecans; which offering came back as a fruitcake soaked in pre-Prohibition Havana rum. Such tokens continued to be passed back and forth between Ivey's kitchen and Roxie's kitchen, growing more valuable in each journey across the yard in Zaddie's arms.

Still, Mary-Love and Sister saw no more of Elinor than they had in previous months. In fact, neither of them set eyes upon Elinor until one day about a week before Christmas. Sister had gone over to Elinor's with a great box of infant clothing, things outgrown by Miriam but which might, she thought, be of some use for Frances. Elinor thanked Sister for her thoughtfulness, asked her inside, served her Russian tea, allowed her to hold Frances and coo over her, and gave her an armful of wrapped gifts to take home and place under the tree.

Early had hoped to be away no more than a week, but twice he sent telegrams to say he had been forced to go farther afield than he had hoped

would be necessary. “I don’t imagine he’s gone make it for Christmas,” said Mary-Love to disappointed Sister. “That’s all right with me. It means we’ll just be plain family.”

Nevertheless, on Christmas Eve, Sister sat in the window of her room for three hours watching out for Early’s arrival. But since the engineer didn’t own an automobile, there was little hope of his driving up in one, and there was no other means by which he could get down from the train station in Atmore. At last Mary-Love came into Sister’s room and demanded that she go to bed. Sister did so, rather than admit to her mother the cause of her anxiety.

. . .

At first, everything seemed to go as well as anyone could have wished. The doors of the parlor had been shut against any early intrusions by the children. After a breakfast that seemed interminable to Grace and Malcolm and Lucille doors were opened and the presents were revealed in all their shining array. Grace clapped her hands and gazed rapturously at the tiers of fancily wrapped gifts that were terraced out from the base of the tree until the whole parlor was nearly filled with them. There were gifts under chairs, lurking behind the curtains, placed on windowsills, stacked on the mantel, and piled on the sofa. Besides these, several large unwrapped gifts stood in the corners of the room—a rocking horse for Lucille, a red bicycle for Malcolm, and a turreted dollhouse, filled with furniture, for herself. The Caskeys sat wherever they could find places in the crowded room, and a few of the dining room chairs were brought up to the open doorway. Zaddie and Ivey and Roxie, who had worked all morning in the kitchen, cleared the dining room and then sat together on a window seat there, from which vantage point they could watch the proceedings and receive the gifts intended for them.

It was Grace’s duty to pick up each present, read the card attached, and hand it out. Malcolm demanded that he be allowed to assist, but since he could not yet read, he had to satisfy himself with distributing the gifts as Grace called out the names. Because of the number of presents involved, this was a slow process and Grace was inclined to make it even more so, often not passing out the next gift before the last had been opened. Everyone got plenty of presents, and soon the parlor was a sea of discarded paper and tissue and ribbon, in the midst of which were neatly stacked islands of gifts, with the cards carefully preserved. The air was thick with

exclamations of surprise, gratitude, admiration, and good-natured envy. Grace was certain she had never been so happy in her life.

The only gifts not distributed were those intended for Early Haskew. These, without even calling out his name, Grace simply set to one side.

The merriment continued for more than two hours. Before the end of it, Roxie and Ivey returned to the kitchen to start cooking dinner. The telephone rang once. Sister, nearest it, went to answer. Hearing the voice on the other end, she immediately turned away, and carried the telephone out of sight behind the staircase.

It was Early Haskew, calling from the train station in Atmore. He apologized for not being able to get there sooner, regretted disturbing everyone on Christmas morning, but wondered if someone might not be sent up to Atmore to fetch him. As soon as he had hung up Sister went into the kitchen where Bray sat at the table opening the first of four gifts that had been under the tree for him. He was already wearing his best uniform, and at Sister's behest went immediately to get out the automobile.

Sister said nothing of this when she returned to the living room. Mary-Love was so deeply involved with the opening of the gifts and the delight of the children that she forgot to ask Sister who it was that had telephoned.

. . .

Early Haskew walked into the house an hour later. Grace and Lucille were in the front parlor with their toys and the tree; Malcolm was outside riding his new bicycle up and down the street; the servants were all working on dinner in the kitchen; and the adult Caskeys, with the two infants, were sitting around the dining table once again.

At the unexpected sight of Early Haskew, Mary-Love emitted a little scream of delight and Queenie began to talk at the rate of a mile a minute to no one in particular. Oscar and James rose with exclamations of surprise and delight, shook hands with him cordially and pulled a chair up to the table for him. Sister, holding Miriam, and Elinor, holding Frances, said nothing. Sister wore a fixed, almost idiotic smile, while Elinor seemed troubled and distracted.

Early sat down at the head of the table and spoke to everyone in turn in his loud, measured voice. He was glad to see James and Oscar again and he had lots of things to tell them and talk over with them. He was very happy to be back in Mary-Love's house and she couldn't have any idea how much he had missed it. He called out to Ivey Sapp in the kitchen that nobody in

Mobile, Montgomery, Pensacola, Natchez, or New Orleans cooked anything like the way that she cooked. Yes, he remembered Miz Strickland very well and Bray had nearly run down her little boy in the street on his new red wheel. He didn't know how he got along without Sister for so long because she always told him what he should be doing and it was sure lonely in those places and he was always turning around to say something to Sister and lo and behold she just wasn't there, and—more quietly—how was Miss Elinor doing, and wasn't her baby just looking *fine?*

Elinor nodded briefly, but did not say a word.

After Early's greetings, Oscar wanted to know what Early had managed to accomplish. Out of deference to his wife, he did not say the words "on the levee," but it was evident, from a tightening of Elinor's mouth, that those words needn't be spoken aloud for her to know perfectly well to what her husband referred.

"Well," said Early, "I tell you, I think I found somebody. I looked all over, I talked to two thousand people—or almost—and I found a man in Natchez who is willing to come here and submit a bid. What I would do if I was the town council is accept his bid even if it's not the lowest. This man —whose name is Avant, Morris Avant—is gone do you the best job. When you've got a job as big as this levee, then you gone want..."

Seeing Oscar cringe as he spoke, Early paused. Oscar had turned and looked at his wife at the other end of the table. Everyone else did too. Elinor's head was lowered, and she was buttoning Frances's little chemise. If she had a telling expression upon her face, no one could see it to read it.

"...a job like this levee," Early went on cautiously, "then you gone want to have it done right."

"I'm going to take Frances upstairs for a nap," said Elinor suddenly. "She can hardly keep her eyes open. Miss Mary-Love, where should I put her?"

"Put her in Miriam's bed, Elinor. Wait, I'll come up with you."

"Oh no, you stay down here. I'll be back down in a bit." Elinor rose and silently walked out of the dining room, into the hallway, and up the stairs to the second floor.

Everyone at the table knew that Elinor had left because of Early Haskew's presence and his talk of the building of the levee. The curious thing was, however, that Elinor had not done more. She had not taken Frances home, she had only gone upstairs with her. She had not said *I will*

not allow myself to be in the same room with that man, she had said *I'll be back down in a bit.* She had hidden her anger behind a mask of polite impassivity. Mary-Love and Sister took deep breaths together and exhaled slowly.

"Will wonders never cease?" asked Sister softly.

"I thought it was gone be up with us," said Mary-Love.

Queenie, for once, sat still and quiet—like one watching a battle from a protected place, anxious to learn which army would win, to which general she would soon swear allegiance.

Elinor did not reappear for the next hour, and for the next hour Early talked of his trip. In the meantime, Roxie came in and began to set the table for dinner. By the time that Early was finished with his chronicle, it was time to call the children in. Miriam had already been fed, and was taken upstairs by Mary-Love and placed in a little fortress of pillows on Sister's bed. Mary-Love then knocked on the door of Miriam's nursery, softly opened the door and told Elinor, who was seated in a chair by the window looking out at the muddy Perdido, that dinner was ready downstairs if she was ready too. Elinor declared that she had been thinking of her family and the place she had come from and had forgot the time. On the way out, Mary-Love peered over into the crib, and exclaimed, "Frances is the prettiest baby I ever did see—except for Miriam of course!"

. . .

Christmas dinner was more formal than breakfast. The infants were sleeping upstairs and the three other children had been banished to a small square red deal table set up in the kitchen, where all three acutely felt the disgrace of their tender ages. Thus the adults had the dining room to themselves, and when they were all milling about the table unsure of where to sit, Mary-Love pointed out places for them all, taking care that Early and Elinor sat as far apart as possible. Having engineered the insult of bringing them together at all, she could afford to be charitable on this small point.

After the blessing, recited by James sitting between Elinor and Queenie, Sister turned to Early, seated beside her, and said, "So, so far as you're concerned, everything is pretty much set?"

"Well, yes," said Early. "Why do you ask?"

"Because then I have something to say," said Sister.

But just at that moment Ivey and Roxie brought in a turkey, half of which had already been carved in the kitchen, a pheasant shot by Oscar on

Caskey land in Monroe County, a plate of fried mullet, a small ham, a sweet potato casserole, bowls of little green peas, creamed corn, stuffing, black-eyed peas and ham hocks, boiled okra, pickle relish, a plate of Parker House rolls, a plate of biscuits, a mold of ice-cold butter with a design of a Christmas tree on top, and a pitcher of iced tea. James was given the ham to carve and Oscar the pheasant.

With the arrival of the food, no one showed any great curiosity to know what Sister had to say; in any case she was used to her concerns being accorded precious little worth. When at last everyone had filled his plate and the platters had been removed to the sideboard and Zaddie had taken away the biscuits and replaced the cooled rolls with hot, Mary-Love said, "So what is it you are dying to say, Sister? I never saw a grown woman twitch so!"

"Has everybody been served now?" asked Sister sarcastically.

"Yes," said Mary-Love, apparently unaware of the tone in her daughter's voice. "So will you please get on with it?"

"Well," said Sister, gazing around the table and disregarding the fact that every head was bowed over a plate and not even bothering to glance up at her, "now that everything is set on the levee, so far as Early is concerned, he and I are gone get married."

Everyone looked up. Everyone put down his fork and stared at Sister. Everyone then turned and looked at Early. Everyone in fact half-suspected that Sister had made it up and that Early would appear as amazed as anybody.

But Early was grinning, and he said loudly, "Sister doesn't care *how* loud I snore!"

Mary-Love pushed her plate away, saying tartly, "Sister, I *do* wish you and Oscar wouldn't tell me things like this during dinner. I tell you, it takes my appetite right away and there's nothing I can do to get it back. Roxie!" she called. Roxie appeared in the doorway. "Roxie, take away my plate. I am not gone be able to eat another bite." Roxie came and took the plate. "Early," said Mary-Love, turning to the engineer who sat at her right hand, "is this true, are you gone marry my little girl?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Early proudly.

"I don't believe it," returned Mary-Love. "Did she ask you, or did you ask her?"

"I asked her, she—"

By this time, the others at the table had regained their composure, and Early's reply to Mary-Love was lost beneath a welter of congratulations. James spoke for all, perhaps, when he remarked, with no thought of unkindness, "Sister, I never thought I'd see the day!"

"When *is* the day?" asked Mary-Love suddenly.

Early's eyebrows shot up. He had no idea. He turned to Sister. Sister said: "Thursday week. The third of January."

"Oh, you cain't, Sister!" cried Mary-Love. "You got to put it off, you got—"

"Thursday week," repeated Sister, quite as loudly as her fiancé might have spoken. She turned to her mother, smiled her bland smile, and said, "Mama, you tricked Oscar into putting off, and all it got you was trouble. You're not gone have a word to say about it this time."

"I am *ashamed,"* said Mary-Love vehemently, "to have people sit at my table and listen to my child talk to her mother that way."

"They can leave if they want to," said Sister indifferently. "Or, Mama, you can leave. Or I can leave and take Early with me. Or we can all just sit here and finish our dinner. Merry Christmas, y'all."

The assembled table thought they had never seen such a hardness in Sister. They looked at her and at Early, and wondered if the engineer knew what kind of bargain he had made.

Sister called to Roxie and told her to bring Mary-Love's plate back. "Mama," said Sister grimly, "this is a happy day for me, and you are not gone spoil it by sending back your plate to the kitchen. You are gone sit still in your place and be happy for me, you hear?"

Mary-Love spent the next half-hour gnawing at a wing of the pheasant. Sister, meanwhile, gave a little account of her wooing by Early, and remarked that everything had been settled between them for more than a month and had only waited for the completion of his plans for the levee to be announced properly.

Mary-Love didn't say another word, but once or twice she glanced at Elinor. Elinor always caught those glances and returned them with a little satisfied half-smile. Mary-Love had been bested by the very weapon she had attempted to employ against Elinor—Early Haskew. Elinor asked what Mary-Love dared not ask: "Sister," Elinor said, "where you going to be living after you and Mr. Haskew get married? Are you going to stay on

here, or are you planning to pack up and move out and leave Miss Mary-Love all by herself?”

Chapter 22

The Spy

Sister would not be put off, Sister would not be persuaded. Mary-Love begged that she be allowed to have a half-decent wedding for at least *one* of her children, but Sister said briskly, "Will it take more than a month to arrange?"

"Anything half-decent would take at least three months, Sister, you know that! We would have to—"

"Then Early and I are getting married next week," said Sister.

Mary-Love would have liked to put up a fight, but Sister made it clear that she would take no part in such an altercation. She intended to marry Early Haskew, and her mother's objection to any part of such a proceeding would only serve to drive Sister away.

Mary-Love was bewildered. She had intended Christmas to be the first step in a major campaign mounted against Elinor and Elinor's ally Queenie. Instead she had found herself attacked by an army—Sister's—she had not even known was in the field. Caught by surprise, she could do nothing but perform a strategic surrender. Her consolation had to be that she was inducting into her family a soldier—Early Haskew—who was inimical to her enemy.

. . .

The ceremony was held in Mary-Love's front parlor, where there were still needles in the carpet from the Christmas tree. The Methodist minister officiated, and Grace was a combination bridesmaid and flower girl. Sister had debated about whether to ask Elinor to be her matron of honor, but knowing with what disgust Elinor viewed her fiancé—or at least her fiancé's purpose in the town—Sister decided not to risk the embarrassment of a refusal.

For a wedding gift James and Mary-Love went in together and bought Early an automobile—just such a one as James had heard him admire on the street one day. In this new automobile, directly after the ceremony, Sister and Early took off for Charleston, South Carolina, a city Sister had never visited but had always wanted to see. After they were gone, Mary-Love sighed her biggest sigh, then sat down at a corner of the dining room table

and tilted her head until it came to rest horizontally on the upraised palm of her hand.

"What's wrong with you, Mary-Love?" said Queenie, who, for the ceremony, had got permission from James to purchase a sea green silk dress at Berta Hamilton's. "Don't you know you have now got one of the finest son-in-laws in all the state of Alabama south of Montgomery?"

"I do know it, Queenie," sighed Mary-Love loudly, as if she intended those still in the front parlor to hear her words. "What I just cain't understand is the way I am treated by my children."

"You have *fine* children. Your children could squeeze you to death with their love."

"Well, that's how I feel about *them.* They don't care much for me, though."

"Of course we do, Mama," said Oscar, who *had* heard his mother from the parlor and had come in to pronounce his undiminished affection.

"If you really loved me," said Mary-Love, still loudly for Elinor and James remained in the next room, "would you have gotten married in James's living room one afternoon when I was down in Mobile shopping? Would Elinor have stood up in front of a female preacher wearing a dress that was only basted together? Would you two have driven away on a honeymoon before I had the chance to kiss you on the mouth and say how happy I was?" Mary-Love had raised her head to the vertical again, and now was speaking these words savagely. "If Sister had loved me, would she have contracted an engagement and kept it secret until she could spring it on me at the dinner table on Christmas Day? Would she have gotten married one week later, when she could just as easily have waited a couple of months and made me happy by it? Would she have invited nobody but the family, when we could have sent out invitations and gotten three hundred people to travel by automobile from Montgomery and by train from Mobile, and *filled* the church?"

"Mama," said Oscar, unmoved by either the loving reproach of her words or the angry reproach of her voice, "you didn't want Elinor and me to get married at all. You put off and put off, until we *had* to do it behind your back. That's what Sister was thinking of. She didn't want you to start with her, that's all. She thought you had an ulterior motive in wanting a church wedding three months from now."

Mary-Love sighed again and said, “Go away, Oscar. You don’t love me.”

“I do, Mama,” said Oscar softly, and he walked out of the room.

. . .

Sister had never said where she and Early intended to live when they returned from their honeymoon. Mary-Love was in a perfect agony to know, but she had never dared put that question to her daughter. Just asking would have given Sister a tremendous advantage in any subsequent bargaining in the matter. Mary-Love was by no means a stupid woman, and she understood perfectly that for all their rebelliousness—exhibited principally in the manner of their marriages—Oscar and Sister loved her. Their high-handedness was a tactic they had learned from Mary-Love herself. Oscar, being a man, had learned it only imperfectly, and had needed Elinor to prod him. Sister had swallowed the lessons whole, and had dragged Early Haskew willy-nilly to the altar. Though she would never have admitted it, Mary-Love was actually proud of her daughter for doing what she had done. By her sudden marriage Sister had attained adulthood in Mary-Love’s eyes; she was within striking distance of equality. And now more than ever before, Mary-Love dreaded losing her, dreaded to be alone in the house; she even declared to herself that she would miss Early Haskew’s loud voice and terrible snoring.

And then there was Miriam to consider; the child belonged to Mary-Love and Sister jointly. It was inconceivable that Sister would attempt to take the child away with her—and almost as difficult for Mary-Love to imagine how she could manage the child on her own. The only solution, it seemed to Mary-Love, was that Sister and Early should remain in the house. Therefore, while Sister and Early were away on honeymoon, Mary-Love drove down to Mobile and picked out the most expensive suite of bedroom furniture she could find. She moved Sister’s furniture out of the front bedroom and repainted the walls. She installed a new carpet, then filled the room with the vast new suite. She even went so far as to knock on Elinor’s door and ask if Elinor might consider running up a new set of draperies for Sister’s homecoming. Elinor, to Mary-Love’s considerable surprise, agreed readily. She even offered to purchase the fabric, but Mary-Love had already taken care of this.

The draperies were sewn that evening and hung the next day. Mary-Love thanked Elinor, and accepted her daughter-in-law’s invitation to take

supper with her and Oscar. For the first time, Mary-Love ate a meal in the house she had built for her son and his wife. Miriam, nearly two, was placed in a high chair brought over earlier by Zaddie, and throughout the meal eyed her real mother with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

. . .

A few days later, Sister and Early returned. She kissed Mary-Love hello, and before she had even taken off her hat she exclaimed, “Mama, I smell new furniture! Have you been down in Mobile again?” Then Mary-Love took her upstairs and showed her what had been accomplished in her absence.

Early, a simple man, remembered that Sister had said that very little would give her greater pleasure than to leave her mother high and dry. He had therefore assumed that upon their return from honeymoon, they would find another place to live. This newly furnished room puzzled him, as did the expression on Sister’s face.

“It’s real pretty, isn’t it, Early?” Sister asked.

He nodded, asking, “Is this where we’re gone be living?”

Sister looked at her mother. “For the time being,” Sister said. “Mama, it’s real pretty, you went to a lot of trouble.”

Mary-Love now knew several things. First was that, despite “for the time being,” Sister had no intention of leaving the house; and second, that she never had such an intention, the appearance she had given of having decided to leave her mother had been merely a feint. In this, Mary-Love thought she saw a little too much of herself. Sister knew what she was doing, and it was to an equal that Mary-Love replied, “Of course I went to some trouble, Sister! I had to do *something* to keep you with me! What would I have done if you and Early had wanted to find someplace else to live? What would we have done with poor old Miriam? Would we have cut her in two with a sword? Would we have given her back to Elinor?”

“Couldn’t give up Miriam! But, Mama,” warned Sister, unwilling completely to give up the edge she had attained, “don’t go getting too used to having Early and me around. You never know when we’ll up and leave you high and dry!”

“Oh, you wouldn’t do that to your poor old mama,” said Mary-Love softly, then left them to unpack.

. . .

Several contractors to whom Early had spoken the month before submitted sealed bids for the construction of the levee, and Early's choice for the job, Morris Avant, had the next-to-lowest. On Early's recommendation, Avant was awarded the first part of the contract.

But a great deal had to be accomplished before actual work on the levee could begin. The construction would require the services of between one hundred fifty and two hundred men, and though some might be unskilled and drawn from the unemployed ranks of Baptist Bottom, most were going to have to be imported. When the water pumping station had been built the year after the flood of 1919, twenty-five workers had been brought in. The foremen had stayed at the Osceola Hotel and the lower-paid workers had camped out on the stage of the school auditorium and been fed in the school kitchen on weekdays and at the Methodist Church on Saturdays and Sundays. This arrangement was hardly sufficient or appropriate for a near-army of men. Someone suggested housing the men in the schools, but depriving the schools of the use of the buildings for nearly two years wasn't really to be thought of seriously. So, in a field just south of Baptist Bottom, the Hines brothers went to work putting up two large buildings for the accommodation of white workers, one a dormitory, and the other a kitchen and dining room.

Perdido citizens began to realize to what extent the levees would alter the aspect of their town. In the short term, it would mean the influx of workers and the expenditure of money, which was bad enough; but now they began to think about what it was going to be like to be hemmed in with walls of dirt for the remainder of their lives; to look out their windows and see not the rivers flowing past but only red walls of clay higher than their houses, wide and stolid and unhandsome. Some remembered how Elinor Caskey had spoken out against the levees, saying just some such thing, and had spoken even though her husband was one of the prime movers in the business.

People now began to ask Elinor's opinion of the plans that had been made, and the preparations that were afoot, but Elinor would only say, "I told everybody what I thought. I still think it. By the time the levees are finished—if they *are* ever finished—it will be like living in an old clay quarry. Levees can wear down, and levees can wash away. Levees can spring holes, and levees can crack wide open. There's nothing that's ever going to stop the flow of a river when it wants to flow down to the sea, and

there's nothing that can keep water from rising when it wants to spill over the top of a mound of clay."

Elinor wasn't to be meddled with during these days. There was something volatile in her temper, in her manner, and in her opinions. Her supper invitation to Mary-Love was not repeated, and though she had made curtains for Sister and Early's marriage chamber, she never even so much as welcomed them back from their honeymoon.

One day when Mary-Love was visiting Creola Sapp, down with some sort of winter fever, she found Creola's youngest child crawling about the floor wearing a dress that she, Mary-Love, had made for Miriam a year earlier. The garment had been one of the many articles of baby clothing that she had turned over to Elinor for the use of Frances, and which Elinor had accepted with apparent gratitude.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said Creola, when questioned, "Miss El'nor good to me, bring me out a whole box of things for Luvadia. Prettiest things you ever saw!"

"I'll say they are, Creola. I'll just say they are!" murmured Mary-Love, furious that Elinor would give all those fine things away to Creola Sapp. She was even more distressed about Elinor's action because it had been discovered by merest accident—that is to say, it had not been done simply for effect. To Mary-Love, to do a thing not merely for effect argued a perversity in Elinor's character. It quite took away Mary-Love's breath.

Mary-Love rushed home and ran upstairs to Sister, who was in the nursery with Miriam. Mary-Love waxed indignant over the notion of those fine clothes going directly from their precious Miriam, *two years old, and she cried unless there was a tiny diamond bracelet clapped around her wrist,* to Luvadia Sapp, *a fat grinning morsel of alligator bait crawling around on the splintery boards of a crumbling shack in the piney woods.* "I cain't understand why Elinor would do a thing like that!" cried Mary-Love, but included in her frustration was her inability to understand *anything* her daughter-in-law did.

Sister's teeth went *clack-clack.* She said, "Mama, Elinor is upset."

"What have I done now?"

"Elinor's not upset because of you, Mama. She's upset because they have started to work on the levee, and she hates that levee the way you and I hate hell and the Republicans."

Mary-Love looked first at Sister, then out the window at Elinor's house as if that façade, perhaps in the configuration of draperies opened and draperies closed, might provide confirmation of Sister's thesis. Then she glanced down at Miriam toddling gravely across the rug, and said, "Sister, I think you may be right about that."

. . .

Frances caught a bit of a cold late in February, a little cold that Roxie said was no more than any child could suffer at that time of the year and at her time of life. Dr. Benquith saw the child and agreed with Roxie. Despite the reassurances, Elinor insisted that the child was in danger of her very life. She told Oscar that for the time being she would sleep in the nursery in case the child should experience difficulty in breathing. Oscar, who could scarcely bring himself to argue against the well-being of his daughter, acquiesced to this. A cot was set up in the nursery and Elinor abandoned her husband's bed.

Frances, to all appearances, soon got over the cold, but Elinor continued to stay with her day and night. Mary-Love and Sister next door speculated that Elinor remained as close to the child as she did not for Frances's protection and comfort, but rather so that no one might discern that the child was totally recovered. In any case, Frances's illness, whether supposed or real, went on and on, and it kept Elinor indoors. Her only foray into Perdido society was her Tuesday bridge games, and these she insisted be held, ignoring rotation, in her own home for the duration of the child's danger.

Queenie Strickland saw more of Elinor than anyone else. Queenie believed in Frances's illness, mainly because it seemed politic to do so. She frequently passed on to Elinor magazine articles that gave precise instructions for the care of ailing infants. She purchased little bottles of quackery at the pharmacy, tied the necks with pink ribbons, and waved them like a pendulum in Frances's face. She came daily to ask after the child, and to relate to Elinor the progress of the levee. From Queenie alone did Elinor accept such news, and as the two women sat in the swing on the second-floor porch, Elinor gazed out through the screens at the Perdido and listened tight-lipped as Queenie spoke: "Yesterday afternoon Sister was down in Baptist Bottom, and on the spot she hired three colored women to work in the kitchen. They gone get two dollars a day and not gone do nothing in this world but cook for seventy-five men. I wish *I* got paid like

that for cooking for Malcolm and Lucille! Then over at the mill, they tore down those little store-buildings that are right on the edge of the river, and some other men were there building 'em right back up again except thirty feet back, and this time they are putting in windows 'cause those buildings are so hot in the summer that the men cain't hardly stand to go in there. And Mr. Avant and Early rode out to Mr. Madsen's—where Mary-Love gets her potatoes?—and told him they'd pay him two dollars for every wagonload of dirt they took out from behind his house. Y'see, he's got this mound right in back of his house—they say it's Indian burying ground and some old Indian bones are laying at the bottom of it pro'bly, and Mr. Madsen says if they find the bones they got to take them away with everything else. He says he was planning to clear it off and plant potatoes back there anyway, but he'll take the two dollars if they offer it to him, he's not proud…"

Because Elinor never objected to hearing these things, and because she had once cautioned Queenie not to tell anyone that she listened to them, Queenie understood that it had become her duty to find out everything there was to know about the building of the levee and to report it directly to Elinor. It was as if Elinor had been a proud sovereign, and the levee builders of Perdido had been her subjects raising earthen barricades and fomenting rebellion. Queenie was the loyal spy who reported every movement of the rabble so that her sovereign might know everything and yet still maintain the appearance of being above such small considerations.

The Hines brothers continued work on the dormitory and dining room for the expected workers. Early and Sister went around Baptist Bottom knocking on doors looking for people in need of employment. Every Thursday the Perdido *Standard* was filled with long articles detailing the preparations under way for the construction of the levee, always including at least one photograph of Early Haskew. In general, the town wound itself up very tightly in preparation for the very first wagonload of dirt to be spilled out onto the bank of the Perdido River. As all these events were rumbling along with ever-increasing speed and ever-increasing noise, Elinor Caskey kept more and more to her own house, and was never seen anywhere near the construction.

Chapter 23

Queenie's Visitor

Work on the levee began on the Baptist Bottom bank of the Perdido south of the junction. Early hired men in Pensacola, Mobile, Montgomery, and even from as far away as Tallahassee, to come and live for a year or so in the dormitory. Quarries in three counties were widened and deepened as stone and earth were extracted and loaded onto trucks or mule wagons. Every morning these vehicles lumbered into town along each of the three roads by which Perdido was accessible to the rest of the civilized world. A few small houses had been razed in Baptist Bottom and the first loads of dirt dropped there, the loose earth packed and molded by an army of colored men with spanking-new shovels. This first wall of clay seemed no more than a child's mud castle raised to enormous and ridiculous size, so that everyone wondered if so fragile-seeming an embankment *could* hold against the river if it took it in its mind to rise?

Every day the local colored population gathered and watched for hours with never-failing interest as the same actions and motions were performed over and over again: a wagon pulled up, dirt and clay were unloaded, dirt and clay were raised to the top of the mound under the direction of an overseer, dirt and clay were tamped into place. On the other side of the river, in the field behind the town hall, an equal number of idle white people gathered and gawked equally hard. Both groups of spectators declared that it was such a slow and such a massive job that there could be no hope of its being finished within their children's lifetimes. Perhaps Early Haskew was a great confidence man and nothing more. Hadn't they better stop the business right now?

A month or so later, one of the early morning gawkers behind the town hall looked across the Perdido and seemed to see the earthwork with new eyes. Previously, the mound of earth on the Baptist Bottom shore had seemed shapeless and amorphous to this man; but this day, in the morning air, without much actual change from the morning before, it seemed a gaudy vision of what the whole rampart would eventually be. This man, astounded by his sudden visionary extrapolation, pointed out what he saw to the next gawker. The second man was even more astonished, for he saw

it too, and he had been one of the levee's most vociferous detractors. The word—or rather the vision—spread, from man to man and from woman to woman throughout Perdido, and everyone went over to Baptist Bottom and looked at the thing up close, and actually applauded Early Haskew when he drove up in his automobile. Suddenly the levee had become a great thing in Perdido.

This remarkable rampart was twenty-five feet wide at its base, about twenty-two feet high—depending upon the part of town—and about twelve feet broad at the top. With every fifty feet or so of the levee that was completed, a layer of topsoil was added to the top and sides, and immediately planted with grass. Black women in the community made forays into the forests and dug up smilax, small dogwoods, hollies, and wild roses, which were also planted in the red clay walls. Further to guard against erosion, Early had slips of kudzu placed at the base of the levee on both sides in great holes filled with pulverized cow manure. He had been assured that no amount of fertilizer could burn the roots of that rampaging vine.

Early and Morris Avant conferred every day, and Morris pointed out that the speed with which the levee could be built was in direct proportion to the number of men they had working on it. Early did a little figuring and a little more talking with Morris Avant and his foremen, then went back to the town council and asked whether they wouldn't authorize money for the building of another dormitory to house more workers. The cost would be offset by the overhead expenses saved in the quicker completion of the project. Early was told to do whatever he saw fit, and the Hines brothers went to work the next day.

Early did not worry about finding workers now to fill that dormitory, for it had become known all over south Alabama, south Mississippi, and the Florida panhandle that wages, room, and board were to be had in Perdido. So when the Hines brothers finished the second dormitory, and two more colored women had been hired on to help in the kitchens, every man in search of work on the levee was accommodated. They drifted in from God-knew-where, appearing suddenly out of the forest or entering town on the buckboard of a wagon bringing in clay or simply trudging in on the road from Atmore. They all went by nicknames, and none seemed to possess a history entirely unblemished.

These men worked so hard all day that it was a wonder that they had the energy, after the sun went down, to sit up for their meals in the dormitory kitchen. But the men ate voraciously, and seemed not to know the word "weariness." At night, even more so than during the day, Perdido seemed to have been invaded by these men; people now locked their doors. The levee-men were rowdy, and they consumed vast quantities of the liquor brewed up on Little Turkey Creek. Two little Indian girls on a swayback mule brought in ten gallons of the stuff each day and sold it at the dormitories every morning before school, entrusting the proceeds to their teacher until school was over. A gambling den run by Lummie Purifoy opened in Baptist Bottom; his ten-year-old daughter Ruel passed her evening serving rotgut liquor by the tin-cupful. Two white women, it was whispered, had been driven up from Pensacola by a colored man in a yellow coat. They were the very *lowest* sort of white women, and actually rented a house in Baptist Bottom. The door of that house, it was said, was never closed to a man who knocked on it with a silver dollar in his fist. Perdido's three policemen tried to stay away from these purlieus of the levee-men at night; even with their pistols, they were no match for one hundred and seventy-five powerful, brawling drunks. It was a mercy that, after dark, these men tended to keep to themselves. Only occasionally might three or four of them be seen reeling up Palafox Street, leaning against store windows with closed drunken eyes; and once in a while they made nuisances of themselves in the audience at the Ritz Theater with rude noises and obscene commentary on the movies. Very occasionally a black man would have to bar his door and plead pitifully for the purity of his daughter, while the daughter ran deftly out the back way.

Yet the white workers—no-good, unpleasant, and possibly dangerous—were a necessary evil. They would go away after a year or so, but the levee they built would protect Perdido for an eternity.

. . .

It was the summer of 1923, and the whole town seemed to stink with the sweat of the levee-men. The construction on the eastern bank of the Perdido had been finished. Two sets of concrete steps had been built into the sides of the levee, and a track had been beaten into the earth along the top. This was a favorite promenade of the colored population after church on Sunday, and colored children played there all day. From the windows of the town

hall, the levee was a bright red wall, and after a rain it became shining red and was a dominant feature of the landscape.

Work had begun just behind the town hall now, and before long it would seem as if the Perdido below the junction were flowing meekly through a deep red gully. Already the river seemed to have surrendered much of its former belligerence and pride.

Beneath the constant heat, the workers were wearier than before, but instead of dampening their spirit at night, the warm weather seemed to cause them to drink more and to carouse with greater vehemence and noise. On these summer nights, when respectable Perdido sat on its porch for air after supper, the racket made by the workers on the far side of the river was a distant but very audible roar, punctuated occasionally by a coherent shout. Perdido rocked grimly, and fanned its face, and said in a low voice, *I sure will be glad when those men have gone back to wherever it was they came from.* And to be on the safe side, hunting guns that usually weren't taken out until deer season were cleaned and loaded and propped in the corner behind the front door. The unspoken fear was that the two white women from Pensacola who had taken up scandalous residence in Baptist Bottom would prove insufficient for the "needs" of the workers.

One night, in the midst of the heat—and the rocking, and the fanning, and the worry—the telephone rang in Oscar Caskey's house about ten o'clock, an advanced hour for the call to be anything but an emergency. Oscar and Elinor were sitting on their upstairs porch as usual and Oscar went to answer it. He came back in a few moments and said, a little uneasily, "It's Florida Benquith, she sounds worried."

Elinor got up and went to the telephone. Oscar hung about and listened to his wife's end of the conversation. This wasn't much, for Florida was a great talker and on this occasion she had more than usual to say.

"Listen, Elinor," she began without preamble, "I'm sorry to call you like this, but I thought you ought to know what happened—or what we *think* has happened, because we're not sure yet. I've just now sent Leo on over there."

"Are you talking about Queenie?" asked Elinor calmly.

"Of course I am! I was standing in my kitchen, Elinor, putting away plates. My window's open for a little breath of air and suddenly I hear all kinds of carrying-on coming from Queenie's house—and it's not Queenie going after those two children either, it's Queenie's voice and a man's voice

and who is Queenie arguing with? is all I can think. So I turn out the light and step out on the back porch so they cain't see me—I didn't want 'em to think I was spying, and anyway I wasn't, I just wanted to make sure Queenie was all right—and I'm listening but I cain't tell what anybody is saying but they keep on with it. Then I hear Queenie holler 'No!' and then I don't hear anything else. Elinor, I tell you, I was starting to get worried."

"What'd you do?" said Elinor.

"I run to get Leo. He's in the living room, reading. I bring him out on the porch and I tell him what I heard and we just stand there listening, but we cain't hear much. We cain't hear anything at all, in fact, and I tell him what I heard before and he says, 'It's probably James Caskey over there telling Queenie she's spending too much money down at Berta's, that's probably what you heard.' I say to him, 'If it's James Caskey visiting over there, then why are all the lights out?' And he doesn't know. So we just stand there in the dark, and then I say to Leo, 'Leo, maybe I ought to give a call over there and make sure she's all right.' And Leo says, 'That's a good idea,' and I'm just about to go inside and pick up the telephone when Leo whispers to me, 'Stop.' So I stop and I look out across the yard and there is somebody coming out of the back door of Queenie's house and it's a man."

"What man?" asked Elinor.

"That's just it, we have no idea what man. But, Elinor, both Leo and I were almost positive *it was a levee-man.* He snuck around the front of the house and looked around and then he took off like lightning. I *know* it was a levee-man, I just know it, and I think something happened to Queenie, so I sent Leo right over there. I told him don't even knock, just go on in, and he did it. So he's over there now and I'm on my way over and, Elinor, I think you better come too."

Florida hung up and Elinor turned to her husband and said: "Well, Oscar, it looks like one of your levee-men has gone and raped Queenie Strickland."

. . .

In the darkened room Queenie sat weeping on the edge of the bed. She had pulled on a skirt, but hadn't bothered to button it. Her underslip was soiled and torn, and she had drawn a house jacket around her bruised shoulders. Florida had made some of Elinor's special Russian tea and taken it to her, but the cup sat untasted on the small table beside the bed. Elinor and Oscar arrived, and Florida said immediately, "Well, Elinor, you've just got to talk

to her. She won't *let* us call Mr. Wiggins." Aubrey Wiggins was the chief of the three-man Perdido police force.

Leo Benquith came in from the kitchen.

"Is she all right, Dr. Benquith?" Elinor asked.

Dr. Benquith shook his head. "Elinor, what happened here tonight…"

"I know, I know," said Elinor soothingly as she sat down on the bed and put her arm about Queenie's shoulder.

Oscar, standing ineffectually by, could only think to say, "Queenie, did you have your door locked?"

Queenie paid no attention to anyone, but continued to sob convulsively.

"Where are the children?" asked Oscar.

"They slept through everything, thank the Lord," said Florida. "So I sent them over to my house. They're fine."

"You didn't tell those children what happened, did you?" asked Elinor sharply.

"'Course not!" replied Florida. "But, Elinor, we got to do something. That levee-man walked into this house, and he"—out of consideration for Queenie she did not finish the sentence; but then she went on quite as if she had—"and so we *got* to call up Mr. Wiggins."

Queenie reached over and squeezed Elinor's hand pathetically, as much as to say, *Don't…*

"No," said Elinor. "Don't call Mr. Wiggins. We don't want to say anything. And, Florida," Elinor went on, turning to Florida and eyeing her with purpose, "you are not to say *anything* to *anybody*, you hear?"

"Elinor—" began Oscar, but was interrupted by Leo Benquith.

"This could happen to other people, Elinor. We got to find the man who did this and string him up on the nearest tree. Or buy him a ticket on the Hummingbird—or something. Queenie, you think you could recognize the man who came in here tonight?"

Queenie drew in her breath sharply and held it. With weary eyes she looked around the room and held each person's gaze for a moment. She swallowed back another sob and then said in a low voice, "Yes. I know the man who did it."

"Well, then," said Leo Benquith, "we ought to get Wiggins over to that dormitory right now and drag that man down to the jail. Soon as you feel __"

“No!” cried Queenie.

There was a moment’s silence, then Elinor asked, “Who was it, Queenie?”

Queenie sat very still and tried to control her shaking. She closed her eyes and then said, “It was Carl. That’s who it was. It was my husband.”

. . .

Nothing was to be done, then. Leo and Florida Benquith went home; there wasn’t any danger that the doctor would say anything, for doctors, after all, held many confidences. Both he and Elinor extracted ironbound oaths from Florida that she would say nothing to anyone. Leaving Malcolm and Lucille with the Benquiths, Elinor and Oscar took Queenie home with them. They went very quietly into the house, hoping to escape the eagle notice of Mary-Love next door.

Upstairs in the bathroom Elinor stripped off Queenie’s clothes and set her in a bathtub filled with hot water and sweet-smelling salts. Queenie sat unmoving as Elinor washed her all over. That night Queenie and Elinor slept together in the large bed in the front room.

The next morning, as Queenie picked at her breakfast, Elinor sat by the window and cut up all the clothing that Queenie had worn the night before. She made Queenie watch as she tossed the scraps into Roxie’s stove.

Somehow, Carl Strickland had found Queenie out. Probably it hadn’t been difficult, for the Snyders—Queenie’s family—were nearly all dead, and the ones that weren’t dead were dirt poor. It could only have been logical to look for Queenie in Perdido, where her rich brother-in-law owned a sawmill and forest land that a million birds could nest in. Penniless, indigent, forsaken by what little respectability his wife had afforded him, Carl bummed his way down from Nashville. He had been casually offered employment on the levee. He took it, worked part of one day, and found out the whereabouts of his wife that very evening. He cajoled his way into her house and demanded money and support. Fighting with her when she refused him, he hit her, ravished her, and slipped away into the darkness.

Early next morning, Oscar drove down to a work site near the town hall where he knew the most inexperienced men had been set to work and without any difficulty found Carl sullenly helping to turn over a wagonload of clay. Carl was tall and thin, with a coarse face that showed in every crease the man’s ill-humor toward the world. Oscar casually called him

over and said, “You’re Carl Strickland. I believe I met you at Genevieve’s funeral.”

The easy tone of his voice made Carl grin, for he knew all of Queenie’s in-laws were rich, and he somehow had it in his mind that they would just as soon assist him as not. “That’s right. I ’member you, too. You’re Mr. Caskey, you’re old James’s nephew, right? Genevieve sure had it easy, living with a man like that. You got as much money as him?”

Oscar smiled, looked around curiously at the work progressing about them, glanced down at his shoes, then up at Carl again, and said, “Mr. Strickland, I got a little something to say to you...”

“What?”

“You better pack your portmanteau and hop on the back of the next conveyance out of this town.”

Carl’s grin and his expectations winked out quite as suddenly as they had winked on. He said nothing, but there was an unpleasant expression in his eyes.

“Mr. Strickland,” Oscar continued after an unflinching moment, “I believe you paid a visit to your wife last night.”

“I did,” said Carl shortly.

“Queenie complained to me of that visit. I think Queenie would be pleased if you didn’t knock on her door anymore. I think it would suit us all pretty well if you gave up this job—it’s mighty hard work, Mr. Strickland, and that sun is awful hot”—Oscar squinted up into the morning sky—“gave up this job, Mr. Strickland, and went someplace that was cool...and pretty far away.”

“I cain’t afford to,” said Carl Strickland. “I cain’t afford to go nowhere. Besides, Queenie is my wife. I got a right to be in this town. I got a right to hold down this job. You cain’t just come out here and say—”

“Mr. Strickland, you have been relieved of your position on this levee. There is *nothing* to keep you here in Perdido.” Oscar took an envelope from his pocket. “Now, considering your long service with our town in the construction of the levee and the great benefits that have accrued from your labor, Mr. Strickland, the town of Perdido is very proud to present you with seventy-five dollars in U.S. currency.” He stuck the envelope in the pocket of Carl’s shirt. “Also inside you will find a schedule of the trains that are going north from Atmore station and the trains that are going south. The

town wasn't certain in which direction you would be traveling this afternoon, Mr. Strickland."

"I ain't going nowhere."

Oscar turned and glanced at the automobile in which he had arrived. As if this were a signal of some sort, a second man, who had been sitting inside fanning himself with the brim of his hat, stepped out of the automobile and wandered over to where Oscar and Carl were standing.

"Sure is early in the day to be so damn hot," said the man, nodding to Carl as he spoke.

"Mr. Wiggins," said Oscar, "this is Carl Strickland. He is distantly related to us Caskeys by marriage."

"How-de-do?" said Aubrey Wiggins, a thin man who sweated and suffered in the sun as much as if he had weighed twice as much as he did.

Carl returned the nod.

"Mr. Wiggins is the head of our police force," explained Oscar. "Mr. Wiggins is gone drive you up to Atmore."

Aubrey Wiggins withdrew a yellow kerchief from his back pocket and wiped his brow. "Mr. Strickland, don't you start worrying, I'm gone make sure I get you there in plenty of time. Which way you gone be going now? Are you going toward Montgomery? Or will you gone be traveling through Mobile? Oscar, my mama was born in Mobile, you know that?"

"I met your mama once," replied Oscar. "She was real sweet to me."

"I love that woman," said Aubrey Wiggins, a faraway look momentarily clouding his eye. "Mr. Strickland, you want a ride over to the dormitory? I s'pose you got a few things you want to pack."

"I ain't going nowhere," said Carl.

Oscar looked at Carl, then at Aubrey Wiggins. Then, pulling his watch from his pocket, he said, "Good Lord, look at what time it is! Aubrey, I got to be moving along or that mill is gone fall apart without me. Nice seeing you again, Mr. Strickland. You be sure and send me a postcard with a picture of some ice on it, you hear?"

"I ain't going nowhere!" Carl shouted after Oscar's retreating figure. Oscar smiled, got into his car, and waved as he drove off.

Aubrey Wiggins, who had put up his soaking kerchief, got it out again, and wiped his neck. "Mobile train is at two, Montgomery train is at three. We could make either one of 'em. You got any preference, Mr. Strickland?"

Chapter 24

Queenie and James

Everyone in Perdido found out what happened to Queenie Strickland, even though all those involved in the incident professed to have remained silent. Florida Benquith was suspected of retailing the incident, but she never admitted to her indiscretion. Fortunately, for Queenie's peace of mind, the matter was laid to rest after a few days' intense gossip by Queenie's unwillingness to speak of the unhappy experience at all or even to acknowledge to herself that it had happened. Three or four months later, however, interest in the matter was renewed, for Queenie Strickland's propensity to roundness of figure increased noticeably.

It was no use for Queenie to deny her pregnancy, or the fact that the impregnation had been highly unwelcome. It was all as generally known as though it had been printed on the front page of the Perdido *Standard* with a photograph of Queenie, her two children at her side, captioned: "Expectation of a Third."

Mary-Love was mortified. This was a blow to the Caskey name, for Queenie was, in everybody's eyes, under the family's protection. That a woman related to her in any way should bear a child by the involuntary coupling with a levee-man—even if she *had* been married to him—was a disgrace to the family. Mary-Love couldn't be brought to speak to Queenie, and declared that the woman ought to be strapped to her bed for the duration of the pregnancy; Mary-Love shuddered every time she heard that Queenie had been seen on the streets. "That woman is carrying her shame—and our shame—before her!"

James Caskey was brought down by the news as well. He imagined—rightly—that Mary-Love would construe the misfortune as his fault: for having in the first place married Genevieve Snyder, which brought Queenie to town, who attracted that villain Carl, who…and so forth. This unfortunate business in Queenie's present made James wonder about Queenie's past. During the seven years of James's marriage to Genevieve Snyder, Genevieve had spent a total of at least five of those years in Nashville with her sister. James had of course met Queenie on several occasions, and had once visited her home in Nashville for the purpose of

securing Genevieve's signature on some important papers. He had known that Queenie was married to a man called Carl Strickland; James had met him once and thought him a sullen, unimproved sort of fellow, but respectably dressed and not an obviously vicious type. Here now was that same man, employed as a levee-worker, wearing ragged ill-fitting clothing, and raping his wife. James was very sorry for Queenie, but he could not help wondering how Genevieve could have spent five years in the same house with this terrible man. Genevieve hadn't been a pleasant sort of woman, it was true, but she had always been well bred. In this respect she was the superior of Queenie, and it was hardly conceivable to James that his wife would have consented to share a home with a brother-in-law who could so easily sink to the level of a migrant worker. There was something wrong with the picture James had always had of Genevieve living quietly and decorously with her sister and her brother-in-law in their white frame house in Nashville. If he had been wrong on this point, then might he not have been mistaken on others as well? It was this sudden uncertainty concerning his wife's past that sent James over to Elinor's one afternoon in November to ask her what she knew of Queenie and Carl's life together in Nashville.

"I don't know anything about it," replied Elinor.

"Queenie loves you," said James. "If she would tell anybody then she would tell you."

"She hasn't told anybody then. I don't know why you need to know anyway, James." Elinor was a bit curt. "Queenie has had enough trouble, and her trouble isn't over yet."

"Is that man coming back?"

"No, no," said Elinor quickly. "Oscar would shoot him. Or Queenie would. Or I would. But she's going to give birth to that man's child."

"Well, the child is legitimate at least."

"He *raped* her. That won't be a happy child, James. Now, why do you want to know about Queenie and Carl?"

James explained why he was uneasy; Elinor seemed mollified. "All right, I see. I really *don't* know anything about their life together. Why don't you go ask Queenie herself? She'll tell you, just explain everything to her."

James reluctantly admitted that he could probably satisfy himself in no other way, although he dreaded to intrude upon his sister-in-law. After her trouble had been revealed to him, James had gone around to all the stores in

town and lifted the limits he had placed on Queenie's spending. He had not talked to her, and suspected that, since she hadn't taken advantage of this largess, she knew nothing of his little gesture of sympathy.

Now, from Elinor's house, he telephoned Queenie, and said in the cheerful coo that his voice always assumed over the telephone: "Hey, Queenie, it's James. Listen, I'm over at Elinor's and she told me you weren't doing anything tonight. You think you could come over to my house and sit for a spell? It's been so long! No, you bring Lucille and Malcolm over to Elinor's and they can play quiet with Zaddie. I'm gone send Grace over here too so you and I can talk by ourselves!"

When he had hung up, he said apologetically, "Elinor, I have just managed to fill up your whole house with children for the entire evening."

"It's all right, James. They may be rambunctious everywhere else, but those children always play quiet here. I don't know why that is."

"They won't disturb Frances?"

Elinor laughed. "Don't you worry. I can't *get* them up here on the second floor. They say they're afraid of this house. They say there's ghosts and things in the closet, even though this is practically the newest house in town."

James looked about him a little uncomfortably and, thanking Elinor again, took his leave.

. . .

James hadn't laid eyes on Queenie recently, and the greatest difference in her seemed not her enlarged belly, but her dazed calmness. It was as if she had been severely chastened, and for what transgression she had no idea at all. At the same time James looked at her through Mary-Love's eyes. James had a tendency to do this, for Mary-Love represented to him the chief arbiter on matters of morality. In that perspective, Queenie appeared somehow more respectable. They sat together in James's formal parlor, James in a rocking chair, Queenie in the corner of Elvennia Caskey's blue sofa. Queenie at first wouldn't look directly at James, but ceaselessly rubbed the nap of the velvet upholstery first one way and then the other, giving that action total attention with her eyes.

"James," she said, "I feel so guilty for not coming over here and thanking you as soon as I found out."

"Found out what, Queenie? Sure is good to see you again," he added parenthetically.

“Good to see you, too. Found out about my little bills around town. Berta Hamilton showed me everything she had in the place and said I could take away anything I wanted. Everywhere else too. James, down at Mr. Gully’s, I was offered a fleet of automobiles that would have put down the Kaiser.”

“Queenie, if you want to put down the Kaiser, I’ll buy you those automobiles!”

Queenie laughed, but the laugh faded quickly enough. “James Caskey,” she said, looking up at him and for the first time catching his eye, “I thought I was gone be happy the day I showed up in Perdido. I thought I was gone be happy for the rest of my life.”

“Nobody’s happy for the rest of their lives, Queenie.”

She shook her head. “I guess not. James Caskey, what’d you want to say to me? Why’d you call me up out of the blue?”

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask me what?”

James’s mouth twitched, and he paused. “Ask you about Carl, I guess.”

“I thought everybody knew.”

“Knew what?”

“This is Carl Strickland’s baby.” She patted her belly.

“Of course it’s Carl’s baby,” James assured her. “Carl is your husband. Whose else baby would it be? Queenie, I want to know about you and Carl in Nashville. That’s why I asked you to come over here.”

“What about us?”

James shrugged; he didn’t know how to put politely what he wanted to ask.

“James,” said Queenie after a moment, “Carl Strickland wasn’t around much.”

“Ah!”

“Is that what you wanted to know? Carl Strickland drinks, Carl Strickland does a lot of things, Carl Strickland doesn’t have very nice habits, and—praise be to God—he was away most of the time. How you think Lucille and Malcolm would have turned out if I had let their Daddy pick ’em up and talk to ’em all the time? Oh, I know what those children are like, I know they’re not ever gone be welcome in this house till they can walk through a room and not pick something up and smash it on the floor, but I have done the best I could…”

“Queenie—”

“Ohhh!” cried Queenie in an exhalation of breath which produced something between a squeal and a sigh, “Genevieve couldn’t *stand* him! She couldn’t stand to be around him!—and he couldn’t stand her. When she’d come up there and see me, he’d go away. So when I couldn’t stand to be around Carl Strickland one minute more I’d call up Genevieve and say, ‘Genevieve Snyder, you come up here tomorrow morning.’ James, I ’pologize for that, I ’pologize for keeping your wife away from you —’cause that’s just what I did.”

Queenie didn’t exactly look as if she were about to cry, but she began smoothing and ruffling up the nap of the upholstery once again.

“It’s all right, Queenie. I’m glad you told me.” It made him think better of his dead wife, that she had abandoned him and his daughter for reasons that were partially unselfish. His uncertainties, too, were now resolved, but what was left was a little curiosity, so he asked, “Queenie, when Carl would go away, where would he go?”

“I don’t know,” answered Queenie. “I never asked. But he couldn’t have gone far, because the minute Genevieve walked out the door with her suitcase he was back. Maybe he was living in the house across the street, and just watching us out the window. He was sneaky like that.”

“What’d he do for work?”

“He worked for the power company. He cleared land.” Queenie stopped fidgeting with the nap of the sofa and looked up again into James’s eyes. “James, you have been good to me. And here I am sitting on this sofa, just lying to you. I’m not exactly lying, I guess, I’m just making things sound better than they really were. Carl Strickland is no good. He was no good the day I married him, he was no good the day he showed up in this town, and he was no good every day in between. He *did* do work for the power company—or at least he used to, but he got fired when they found out he was stealing things. I don’t even know what kind of things. And he was in jail—twice. One time for beating up a man about something and one time for cutting a woman’s arm with a razor-knife. See, that’s when Genevieve came to stay with me, when Carl was in jail, ’cause I was afraid to be alone and ’cause I didn’t have any money and that’s how Malcolm and Lucille and me lived, on that money you sent Genevieve every month. And when Carl would get out of jail, then Genevieve would come back here to stay with you.

“James, Genevieve wasn’t an easy woman to get along with, I know that, but you didn’t know our daddy either. James, our daddy beat Genevieve. One day he fired a gun at her, and if I hadn’t thrown a platter at his hand the bullet would have gone right through her head. Daddy got killed out in the woods—I don’t even know how, and I don’t think I want to know—and Genevieve and I were all by ourselves. Pony was already off in Oklahoma. We took care of ourselves; Genevieve went to school and I went to work, and when Genevieve needed help I helped her and when I needed help she helped me. Neither of us would ever have won any prizes for anything, but she was good to me and I was good to her. It was like cutting off my arm when I opened that telegram and found out she was dead. James Caskey, you have been so good to me—when you didn’t have to be—that I thought you should know all this. Nobody else knows it, not even Elinor. I guess I would appreciate it if you would not spread it around.”

James was silent for several moments, though obviously greatly perturbed. Finally, he rose and paced up and down behind the sofa on which Queenie still sat, now again smoothing and ruffling up the nap of the blue upholstery. “Queenie, isn’t there *something* I could do for you? Isn’t there something you want I can buy for you? You know, don’t you, that I’m always gone take care of you, and I’m always gone take care of Lucille and Malcolm?”

“Long as they don’t come in here and break things, you mean?” said Queenie, with a little giggle that was reminiscent of her old way, before the trouble had come upon her. “James Caskey, there’s nothing I want. Or wait, there is one thing, just one thing…”

“What is it?”

Queenie stood up and straightened her dress. She turned and faced James and she looked at him seriously. “Sometime I want you to send me a telegram. And the boy will come up to the door, and say, ‘Miz Strickland, here’s a telegram for you,’ and I’m gone give that boy a silver dollar, and I’m gone sit down on the front porch and open that telegram, and it’s gone say, *Dear Queenie, I have just put Carl Strickland twenty feet under the ground in a marble casket with combination locks.* That’s the one thing you can do for me. You can send me that telegram.”

Chapter 25

Laying the Cornerstone

Interesting as were Queenie's problems, the subject couldn't hold up for long against the all-consuming fascination with the levee. The project had continued apace, and with far fewer snags than appeared in the brief lengths of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers as they flowed through the town limits. The bond issues had been approved by the legislature, the bonds sold and the money gathered in and deposited in the Perdido bank. Already the levee had been completed on both sides of the river south of the junction, and the townspeople congratulated themselves on the fact that were the water to rise tomorrow, only the two sawmills and the stately homes of the Caskeys and the Turks and the DeBordenaves would be destroyed. All the rest—the town hall, downtown, the workers' houses, Baptist Bottom, the homes of the shopkeepers and professional people, and even the dormitories and kitchen of the levee-men themselves would be only as wet as falling rain could render them. Just before Christmas of 1923, the first wagonloads of dirt were poured out at the edge of the junction, and the second levee began to creep northeastward along the Blackwater River toward the cypress swamp, to render safe the Caskey, Turk, and DeBordenave mills, whose prosperity had made the building of the levees possible in the first place.

The levees may have been no more than massive lengths of packed red clay, but already Perdido was growing so accustomed to their presence that they began to seem not so unattractive after all. The roses, the dogwoods, the holly, the smilax—and above all the kudzu—had taken root, and there was more green and less red to be seen every day, at least on the townsides. The narrow path atop the levee on the western side of the Perdido had become a favorite promenade for the white population after church, and mistresses waved to their maids disporting themselves on the far side of the river in *their* best clothes. People would look at the levees and exclaim vehemently, "Lord, I am just about to forget that the levee is there, I am getting so used to it!" Or people would remark, "It was always so *flat* around here, I don't know why we didn't think of this before!" Or they judged, "The levee is gone be worth every penny we pay for it, just to know

that our children aren't ever gone have to learn what it's like to go through a flood."

Soon the levee along the Blackwater was completed. A hundred yards beyond the Turk mill it ended in a steep ramp that descended onto the low mound of an Indian burial place. This ramp became a favorite spot for the boys of Perdido—led in mischief by Malcolm Strickland—who rode their bicycles on top of the levee all the way from the workers' dormitory, past Baptist Bottom, turning at the junction as the levee turned, past the sawmills, and out into the piney forest again. The rivers were at the left and the town below to their right. The boys wondered if they could ever get nearer the sky, and were certain that the Rocky Mountains themselves could be no higher than their town's levees. At the end, they let go of their bikes' handlebars, threw their arms up into the air, and sailed down the ramp across the top of the Indian burial mound. They then grasped their handlebars again and applied their brakes at the last possible moment before coming to grief in the thicket of briars and broken bottles and other detritus of construction work that lay on the other side of the mound.

The levee along the Blackwater had been finished in very good time, and now there remained only the levee along the upper Perdido, which would protect no more than the millowners' houses. Early Haskew and Morris Avant had worked wonders with the construction so far, and were actually under budget.

Work continued without interruption, beginning at the thicket between the Turk house and the town hall. The levee-men went at it with a will, for the end of the project seemed in sight. But, oddly, progress here began to slow down. Early Haskew wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was an instability of the bank along this section of the Perdido, but every night half the clay that had been brought to the riverside during the day slid down into the water and washed away with nothing to show for the effort but a slightly redder tinge to the already red Perdido water. The other portions of the levee had seemed almost to build themselves, the work had gone so easily—or so it seemed now in comparison with this final recalcitrance. No headway could be made. Tons and tons of clay and gravel and plain old dirt were brought in every day and piled up and packed tight, but half of what was built up was certain to be eroded away in the night.

Early was frustrated, and Morris Avant cursed a great deal. The levee-men became restless and anxious, acting as if there were something perhaps

more supernatural than geological at work in the matter. Many of the men declared that they had heard about a lake being dredged over in Valdosta, and that the pay for unskilled workers was higher, so they left Perdido with what little money they had managed to put aside. Some of them actually did go to Valdosta, but others appeared to have wanted only to put Perdido behind them. The black men employed on the levee were suddenly overwhelmed by the necessity of putting new roofs on their Baptist Bottom homes. Others developed bad backs, or lost temporarily the use of their right or left arms. So while the work to be done had doubled in difficulty, Early's work force decreased by half. Sometimes it looked as if the levee behind the millowners' mansions never *would* be finished.

"I don't know," said Oscar to his wife one evening, as he stood on the screened porch staring out at the still distant limits of the levee construction, "if they are *ever* gone get up this far."

"They won't," said Elinor, matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean?"

"The river won't let them finish," explained Elinor, but for Oscar, that was no explanation at all.

"I still don't understand what you're trying to say, Elinor."

"I'm trying to say that the Perdido isn't going to allow the levee to be finished."

Oscar was perplexed. "Why not?" he asked, as if the question were sensible.

"Oscar, you know how I love that river—"

"I do!"

"Well, this town *belonged* to that river, and the levees are taking it away, and the Perdido isn't getting anything in return."

"You think everybody should stand on the edge of the water and throw in hard cash or something?"

"You know," she said, "at Huntingdon I took classes about the ancient civilizations, and what they used to do whenever they built something real big—like a temple or an aqueduct or a senate house or something—they would sacrifice somebody and bury him in the corner of it. They'd tear off his arms and his legs while he was still alive and pile all the pieces together and then cover it up with stones or bricks or whatever they were building with. The blood made the mortar hold together, everybody thought. And it was their way of dedicating it to the gods."

"Well," said Oscar, a little uncomfortably, "James is gone arrange the dedication ceremony when the levee finally *does* get finished, but I don't think he is planning anything along *those* lines. Is there maybe some *other* way to pay the river back that you can think of?"

Elinor shrugged. "I certainly have been wracking my brain trying to think of one."

. . .

A few days later, Queenie Strickland gave birth to a boy. The baby would not have lived had Roxie—in attendance with Elinor and Mary-Love—not unwrapped the umbilical cord from around the child's neck, where it was choking him. The night that her son was born, Queenie woke sweating from a nightmare in which her husband Carl was walking up and down on the front porch, seeking a way into the house. She swept her sleeping infant up into her arms and held him tightly against her breast, hoping to still the harsh beating there. Oscar had placed a loaded shotgun in the corner of the room, and the sheriff had promised to hang her husband on sight if he ever came to town again, but Queenie knew that one night she would hear those booted footsteps on the front porch in cold reality.

. . .

That same night, at the precise moment that Queenie Strickland woke from her nightmare and clutched her newborn child to her, John Robert DeBordenave awakened also. The unlighted room and the night outside were no darker perhaps than the inside of John Robert's mind; in fact, he scarcely knew that there was any difference to be drawn between the states of waking and sleep. Poor John Robert was now thirteen, and was to be advanced this coming autumn into the fourth grade, as little prepared for that promotion as to be instantly declared Under Secretary of the Interior in charge of water projects. Grace Caskey and numberless other children had left him behind, and the farther John Robert was left behind, the gloomier he became. It was no longer enough to be tickled in the ribs once a day as his pockets were rifled for candy; not enough to watch his classmates' mysterious games from the corner of the building where he rubbed his back ceaselessly against the rough bricks as an exercise in sensation. His sister Elizabeth Ann ignored him now, and seemed embarrassed by his presence. His mother and father smiled at him and hugged him and shook him lovingly by the shoulders. All this was no longer enough for John Robert,

and though he knew he wanted something more from life, he had no idea what that something more might be.

More candy. This thought now came from some dark corner of John Robert's half-mind.

More candy was not the answer, but John Robert's stunted brain couldn't conceive of anything better than that.

A ray of light from the setting moon was suddenly cast onto the floor of John Robert's room. He got up out of the bed and stood near that spot of light; he stuck his foot into it, knelt down and stuck his hand into it. Then, in that position, he gazed up and out the window at the moon itself. The moon was waning and gibbous, but John Robert had no more idea of the moon's periodic alteration of shape than the moon had of John Robert's vague desires for more candy. He went to the window and looked out over the lawn at the back of the house. The levee, despite all the problems, had been inexorably extended, and now the major part of the work had been done across the back of the DeBordenaves' property, and was just now beginning at the Caskeys', so directly before him and to the right rose its black bulk. Here and there a band of paint around the handle of a spade or perhaps the metal of the spade itself left by the workers glinted in the moonlight. And to the left of the construction he dimly saw the Perdido, with a single line of the moon's reflection quivering on its black surface. James Caskey's house, glowing a cool bluish-white in the moonlight, stood stolid and square in the plot of sand that began where the DeBordenaves' grass left off abruptly. And there in that sandy yard were the oak trees that John Robert loved so much—two in particular, that he could see if he leaned out a little farther. These were about four feet apart, and grew straight up to the sky. Between these two trees, some years before, Bray Sugarwhite had nailed a board to form a little bench, and John Robert had watched with wonder as the bark of the oak trees had grown around the ends of the board, surrounding them and holding the board fast, as if the trees had laughed at Bray's nails and had said to each other, *Hey, we're gone show Bray how to do this thing right.* Sitting on that board day after day, coming inside only for meals, John Robert had watched the progress of the levee as it crept slowly toward him along the bank of the river.

John Robert now leaned out the window, and saw, sitting on his favorite bench, Miss Elinor. She was wearing a dress that glowed the same

bluish-white as James Caskey's house. She smiled and waved to him, and held her finger to her lips for silence.

Not knowing why, and never considering that perhaps he ought not, John Robert pushed a chair against the wall beneath his window, climbed onto it, unlatched the screen, wriggled out, and dropped into his mother's bearded-iris bed beneath, scraping himself against the side of the house in the process. The sharp leaves of the plants ripped his pajamas in two or three places, and underneath sliced his skin, but John Robert was so accustomed to small injuries that he scarcely noticed them. He picked himself up and ran barefoot through the dewy grass to the edge of his lawn.

Miss Elinor still sat upon the bench, though now she leaned against one of the trees and patted the seat beside her in invitation to John Robert to join her.

John Robert hesitated, then with no more concrete reason for going on than there had been for the hesitation, he lifted his foot from the dewy grass and placed it down on the raked sand.

The sand stuck to the soles of his feet as he made his way across the yard. He timidly seated himself by Miss Elinor and looked up into her face. He could no longer make out her expression, however, for the shadow of the tree trunk shaded it into blackness.

John Robert said nothing, but he hummed a blurred little tune and waved his short little legs beneath the wooden plank, kicking up sand. He felt Miss Elinor's arms comfortingly encircling his shoulders. He stared before him at the dark hulk of the levee, and continued to hum.

The boy perceived nothing strange in Miss Elinor's sitting on the bench at such an hour, in her beckoning him, in her silence, or in the tender grip with which she now embraced him. John Robert DeBordenave took notice and affection however and whenever it came, and never questioned its source or motive. He was content to sit and hum and kick his legs in and out of the shadows of the trees, so that now and then a spray of sand fell twinkling like a shower of miniscule stars. And when Miss Elinor rose from the seat beside him and with no apparent effort lifted him up and set him on his feet and pushed him in the direction of the levee, he did not resist her gentle urging for a moment. She walked behind him with her hands on his arms and directed him toward the most advanced point of the levee construction.

The levee-men on this day had upturned their carts of red clay, for the first time, onto Caskey land. Clods of clay had spilled out over Zaddie's rake designs and shone black now on top of the gray sand that gleamed in the moonlight. Tomorrow the men would begin in earnest, and within a week or so the river would no longer be visible from the windows of James Caskey's house. The generous grounds behind the houses would be narrower by twenty-five feet or so.

John Robert was not allowed this close to the river, and obedience being such a habit with him he was uneasy despite the presence of Miss Elinor behind him.

When John Robert stopped, instinctively knowing that he ought to go no farther, Miss Elinor's grip on his arms became suddenly tight and painful. He could no longer move either his arms or his body, so tight was Miss Elinor's hold. He twisted his head around and looked up at her in meek protest.

But it wasn't Miss Elinor's face that returned his gaze. He couldn't see much of it because the moon was hidden directly behind that head, but John Robert could see that it was very flat and very wide and that two large bulbous eyes, glimmering and greenish, protruded from it. It stank of rank water and rotted vegetation and Perdido mud. The hands on John Robert's arms were no longer Miss Elinor's hands. They were much larger, and hadn't fingers or skin at all, but were no more than flat curving surfaces of rubbery webbing.

John Robert turned his face slowly and sadly back to the river. He stared before him at the levee construction and the muddy water that flowed silent and black behind it. What little mind and consciousness the child possessed was being burned away by Miss Elinor's betrayal, by her becoming something else, by her transformation into this terrible thing that held him in its grip. He began to weep, and his tears flowed softly down his cheeks.

Behind him he heard a little hiss of wetness, as when the belly of a large and still-living fish is slit open with a knife. One of John Robert's arms was raised out from his body and he continued to weep.

There was a wrench and a tear, and a jab of pain so violent and strong that John Robert couldn't even identify it as pain. Then the child saw—but did not know what he saw—his own arm tumbling through the moonlight. It landed with a thump on the red clay at the very edge of the Caskey

property. The moon shone down upon it, and ten feet away John Robert DeBordenave saw the fingers of his own disembodied hand grasp and squeeze the clods of clay that lay beneath it.

His other arm was raised and wrenched out of its socket. It, too, sailed through the air and landed across the other; this time the palm lay upward so that the clawing fingers clutched nothing but air.

John Robert now felt his body engulfed with warm liquid, and did not know that it was blood. Coherent thought had never come easily to John Robert, and now it had entirely forsaken him. He slumped to the ground, and one of those webby appendages that were not hands at all was pressed against his chest. With a splintering of bone, a stripping of tendon, and a tearing of flesh, first one leg and then the other was twisted all the way around in its socket. John Robert saw them arch through the air and fall twitching on top of his detached, crossed arms.

The last thing that John Robert DeBordenave perceived was the slight whistle of wind in his ears and a light breath of wind across his face as all that was left of him, his trunk and head, were picked up and hurled through the air. He turned and twisted, and saw his own blood streaming from the holes in his body, gleaming in thousands of black droplets in the moonlight. He jerked once when he fell atop the pile of his own limbs, and was conscious for one second more as he saw a sheet of clay and gravel from the top of the levee come sliding down on top of him. A small stone struck his right eye, bursting it open like a spoon plunged into the yolk of an egg. John Robert DeBordenave, his twisting head at last stilled beneath the small avalanche of pebbles and clay, knew no more.

Chapter 26

The Dedication

Caroline DeBordenave was frantic for days after her son's disappearance. The noise of the levee-men, which had never bothered her before, seemed to drive directly through her skull now, and she demanded that her husband halt all the work until their boy had been returned to them.

No one had any idea where to *begin* to look for John Robert. The unlatched screen told how he had got out of the house. His missing pajamas told what he had been wearing, but of his disappearance no one could say more. Teenaged boys bearing stout sticks for defense against rattlesnakes walked through the woods and called his name. People in Baptist Bottom looked under broken-down wagons to see if the white boy had taken shelter there. The mayor of Perdido made a tour of inspection of the marble-floored room beneath the town hall clocks, but John Robert wasn't among the bats and bird-nests up there. Zaddie wriggled around in the crawl spaces beneath the millowners' mansions, but found nothing but rodent nests and spider webs.

After ten days, Caroline DeBordenave had to accept what everyone else in Perdido had known from the beginning: John Robert had drowned in the Perdido. Children in town didn't get bitten by mad dogs or fall down empty well shafts or suffer fatal accidents while playing at "barbershop" or discharge loaded pistols into their throats. In Perdido, unlucky children drowned in the river, and that was that. Except for the junction, the young members of Perdido's population led a charmed life. But the river took its sacrifices frequently, and sometimes the bodies were recovered by a fisherman far downstream. Most of the time, even when the dying throes of the girl or boy were witnessed by a dozen little friends, the body was never found. The child was dragged down to the bed of the river and buried there beneath a coverlet of red mud, to sleep undisturbed until the Resurrection should rouse those tiny bare bones to partake in Glory.

The search for John Robert went on longer than any had before. The boy's dim intelligence *might* have led him someplace other than the Perdido, and Caroline DeBordenave cried out that her son would no more go near that river, having been warned against it all his life, than he would

have driven a heated spike through his own hand. The DeBordenaves, too, were millowners, and their son, feeble in mind and body though he might be, was a personage of importance. And his feebleness made John Robert an object of greater pity than if he had been a ruffian white boy whose father was a drunk or some untraceable black girl who was only number three of her parents' eight children and had shown not the least aptitude for cooking or laundry.

Despite the intensity of the search and despite Caroline's complaining, work on the levee did not halt. In fact, it hastened. Whatever it was that had held back work on the upper Perdido stopped on the day of John Robert's disappearance. Thereafter, the curtain of earth flew up, rod by rod, and before the Caskeys knew it, the view of the river from each of the three houses was blotted out. Even when Oscar stood on tiptoe on the sleeping porch he couldn't peer over the top of the levee to see the water on the other side. He could scarcely see the tops of the live oaks on the far bank of the Perdido.

Oscar had dreaded this moment, for he knew with what baleful foreboding Elinor had spoken of the time when the river should be obscured from their windows. Elinor surprised him; she hadn't complained, even of the noise and the litter of the workmen. In fact, she sent Zaddie and Roxie out with pitchers of iced tea and lemonade at noon. She hadn't been out of sorts at all. When she wasn't visiting with Queenie and her new little baby, Elinor sat on the porch and rocked in the swing and read magazines and only made little grimaces when occasionally some workman's blasphemy or obscenity sounded clear upon the breeze.

One Sunday afternoon when Oscar and Elinor were together on the upstairs porch, Oscar stood up, went over to the screen, and with a broad gesture pointed far to his left. "They gone take the levee about a hundred yards beyond the town line, just to make sure everything's all right. You never know, the town might grow in that direction and somebody'll want to build out there. But the way they going now, they gone be finished in another two or three weeks." He paused, turned, and looked at his wife, wondering if he had perhaps gone too far. But Elinor continued to rock with perfect placidity. Oscar ventured to remark, "You know, I really used to have the idea that you were gone be upset when the workman got up this way."

“I thought I was, too,” replied Elinor. “But it doesn’t do any good to get upset, does it? I couldn’t stop the levee all by myself, could I? And didn’t you say that you would never get any money from the bank unless the levee was built?”

“That’s right. We’re all set now,” replied Oscar.

Elinor said, with a small embarrassed smile, “I guess I feel a little better about that old levee now.”

“What made you change your mind?” Oscar asked curiously.

“I don’t know. I guess I thought Early and Mr. Avant were going to cut down all my water oaks, but Early told Zaddie this morning that he would be able to leave every one of my trees standing.”

“I don’t suppose, though, I’ll be able to persuade you to go to the dedication ceremony?”

“Oh, Lord, no!” Elinor laughed gaily. “Oscar, I’ve already had a little party for the levee.”

. . .

The levee was finished, and the levee-men were paid off. They dispersed with such rapidity that the five colored women who worked in the kitchens were left with four hundred pounds of beef, and three hundred pounds of pork, and one thousand pounds of potatoes. Eventually, through the largess of the town council, that surplus found its way into the skillets and pots of Baptist Bottom. The dormitories in which the levee-men had lived for nearly two years were swept out, boarded over, and locked tight until some use could be found for the buildings. The last bits of work on the curtains of clay that now protected every square foot of built-up Perdido could easily be accomplished by the twenty black men who remained in Early Haskew’s employ.

The two white women who lived in Baptist Bottom returned to Pensacola when their red-light custom evaporated. Lummie Purifoy’s gambling hall closed, and his daughter Ruel took up candy-making. The Indians out on Little Turkey Creek closed down two of their five stills. And Perdido, in general, breathed a little easier.

The dedication ceremony, arranged by James Caskey, was held in the field behind the town hall; a triangular podium had been built in the corner where the upper Perdido levee met the lower Perdido levee. James Caskey made the introductory speech, and the town of Perdido cheered him and the levee. Morris Avant rose and promised that he would sit down at a table and

eat the Methodist Church steeple if one drop of riverwater ever appeared on the town side of the levee. Early Haskew got up and claimed that there wasn't a finer town or friendlier people to be found in all of Alabama, and just to prove it he had gone and married Sister Caskey and they were already happier than pigs in sunshine. Tom DeBordenave and Henry Turk and Oscar Caskey then each in turn stood and proclaimed an era of unmitigated prosperity for Perdido on account of the levee. As the audience bowed its head, and the preachers prayed their prayers of dedication to the God of the Methodists and the Baptists and the Presbyterians, the downspout in the center of the junction, directly behind the speaker's stand, but invisible to all because of the curtain of clay, swirled the red water of the Perdido and the blacker water of the Blackwater faster than ever, dragging down to the bed of the rivers more detritus, living and inanimate, than it usually did, as if it wished it might draw in the whole town of Perdido—industry and houses and inhabitants and all. But the combined power of those two rivers and the desperate strength of the maelstrom at their junction had no effect on the levees, and the waters flowed and plunged and swirled and eddied and glided on, seen only by those brave and mischievous children who played atop the levees and by those who glanced curiously down into the water from the safety of the bridge spanning the river below the Osceola Hotel.

. . .

Perdido was no longer the same town, so much of Elinor Caskey's prediction had proved true. Perdido no longer *saw* the rivers that had given the town much of its character, except when it promenaded along the levee or crossed from downtown over into Baptist Bottom. Now Perdido saw the levee, the newer parts of it still red, but the first-built parts now covered over with the dusty deep green of the kudzu vine.

During those speeches on the day of dedication, Perdido looked around at what had been built, and now, quite suddenly, Perdido seemed to see the levee with strange eyes: it looked as if some unimaginably vast snake had slithered out of the pine forest and curled itself around the town, and now lay sleeping, an unwitting protector of those whose habitation was within its shadow.

Perdido looked around at the levee that lay coiled on every side, and at the end of James Caskey's ceremony, the applause perhaps wasn't as enthusiastic as it had been at the beginning.

. . .

One warm evening in September of 1924, about a week after the dedication of the levee, Tom DeBordenave knocked on the door of Oscar Caskey's house. Zaddie let him in and showed him up to the screened porch on the second floor where Oscar and Elinor sat in the swing. Tom admired the baby in Elinor's arms; he admired the house he had walked through; he admired the view of the levee from the second floor of Oscar's house. Probably he would have gone on forever in admiration of something or other had not Elinor discreetly taken her leave and left him alone with Oscar.

"Oscar," Tom began, breaking off in the middle of an encomium upon the generous dimensions of the sleeping porch the moment it seemed Elinor was out of earshot, "we are in trouble." Not yet knowing whom "we" was intended to signify, Oscar said nothing. "The flood hurt us—real bad."

"It hurt everybody," agreed Oscar with cautious sympathy.

"It hurt us worst of all. I lost my records, I lost my inventory. If it could float, then it got washed away. If it could spoil, then it rotted away to nothing. If it could sink, then it sank, and I never saw it again."

"Tom, you've recovered," said Oscar kindly, confident that by "we," Tom referred only to the DeBordenave mill. "You've got everything going again. Of course it takes time—"

"It takes money, Oscar. Money I haven't got."

"Well, now that the levee's built, you can borrow it from the Pensacola banks. Or the Mobile banks."

"Oscar, cain't you understand? I don't *want* to straighten things out. I want to get out of the business." He sighed. "I want to get out of Perdido."

Quietly, Oscar said, "Are you talking about John Robert?"

"Caroline won't even pick up the telephone when it rings. She thinks it's gone be some old fisherman saying he has caught John Robert on his hook and could we please come and pick him up. And I'm about as bad as she is. Poor old John Robert, I just know he drowned in the Perdido, but, Lord God! I wish we could find his poor old body so we could know for sure. It sure would be a comfort to put him in a decent grave. Oscar, Caroline is about to go out of her mind. Elizabeth Ann is away at school and I'm at the mill, and she's alone in that house all day. I just don't know *what* we're gone do. Except I do know we're gone get out of Perdido. Caroline has people up near Raleigh, and we're going there. Her brother has

a tobacco concern, and I'm sure he'll find me something to do. We sure are gone miss this place, but, Lord God! we got get away and stop thinking about poor old John Robert. So that's why I'm here, on account of John Robert. I came to see if you wanted to buy the mill."

Oscar whistled for a few moments, leaned forward and put his hands on his knees. Then he said, "Tom, listen, I'm not the man you should be coming to. You know that James and Mama are the only ones around here with money."

"I know that. I also know that you make the decisions. You know, Oscar, you may think Henry and I don't know what's going on, but I tell you we do. We know what's going on because Caroline and Manda have told us what is going on."

Oscar's brow was furrowed. "Elinor has been saying something?"

"Not much," said Tom. "But enough so that Caroline and Manda figured it out. Elinor thinks you don't have enough on your own. And Henry and I think that, too. That's why I am offering *you* the mill and that's why I am *not* offering it to James and Mary-Love."

The two men remained another couple of hours on the darkened porch. Their business, the most momentous deal that had ever been considered in the history of the town of Perdido, might have been about the price of a load of kindling, their voices were so soft and conversational. Real business in Alabama wasn't conducted in offices or in mill-yards or across store counters. It went on on porches, in swings, in the moonlight, or perhaps in the corner of the barbershop on the shoe-shining perches or in the grassy plot behind the Methodist Church between Sunday school and morning service or in the quarter-hour that preceded Oscar's Wednesday night domino game.

"'Course," said Tom DeBordenave, "the real question is, have you got the money?"

"Mama and James do. Or they could get it. I haven't got a penny except my salary and a little bit of stock."

"Borrow it from the bank. James will cosign even if Mary-Love won't. And I tell you what, you pay me half tomorrow, you can pay the rest over five years, ten years, that doesn't matter much. I'd like to be rid of it, and I'd like it to go to you."

"Tom, something worries me."

"What?"

“Henry Turk worries me. Henry’s not gone be happy if I suddenly buy you out and he’s left sitting there in the Caskey shadow.”

“Henry’s in a little trouble, too,” said Tom. “You know that. Henry couldn’t afford to buy me out. There’d be no point in my even speaking to him.”

“I don’t like making Henry feel bad,” said Oscar, shaking his head.

“I don’t either, but what can I do? I want to sell my place.”

“Sell Henry part of it,” Oscar suggested.

“What part?”

“Anything he wants—your customers, your inventory, your notes outstanding, your equipment, your mill-yard—whatever he wants except the land. I want all your land. You make sure I get every acre.”

“You’re asking me to go to more trouble.”

“You’ll get more money out of it if you sell to two instead of one. And I want old Henry to feel good about this. If he buys up your mill over there it’ll *look* to him like he beat me out, and he’ll feel fine. All Henry wants is a bigger yard to walk around in, and all I really want is the land.”

“Oscar, let me tell you something. I think you’re foolish buying up all this land. You don’t even cut what you’ve got now. You haven’t got the mill capacity to do it.”

“Oh, Tom, you’re right, you came to the right man when you wanted to sell, ’cause I know I’m no good at this sort of thing. But the fact is, Mama and James and I decided that we wanted land, so whenever we see it coming down the road we flag it down and hop on.”

The men talked at greater length, though to no altered purpose. In the way of Southern business, any agreement of this complexity must be talked over until every point has been argued out and agreed upon at least three times, by way of fixing it not only in the minds of the parties involved, but in their hearts as well. At Elinor’s direction, Zaddie brought up a tray with two small glasses and a bottle of pre-Prohibition whiskey on it, and the third reiteration of the agreement was worked through rather more quickly with the help of the liquor.

. . .

The next morning, Oscar led James Caskey out into a remote corner of the pine forest and told him of Tom’s offer. James thought it an excellent opportunity for Oscar, and by Oscar’s decision to take only the land, the whole thing might be kept more or less a secret from Mary-Love. She

would otherwise object to any plan by which her son achieved any semblance of financial independence, even if that semblance were no more than a debt for a quarter of a million dollars.

Within the week, a kind of treaty had been worked out among the three millowners for the division of the DeBordenave holdings. Henry Turk, as Oscar had predicted, took over the physical plant along the Blackwater River—all the land there, the buildings, the inventory, and the machinery. This cost him three hundred thousand dollars, which he was to pay in eight installments without interest. This excellent bargain Tom DeBordenave was able to accede to because Oscar was paying him an equal amount, in cash borrowed from the Pensacola bank, for the thirty-seven thousand acres of timber he owned in Baldwin, Escambia, and Monroe counties.

Two lawyers came down from Montgomery, put up at the Osceola Hotel, and worked for a week straight on the business of deeds and transfers. Only when everything had been signed was the announcement made of the partition of the DeBordenave property. This was a vast shock in Perdido, and all the townspeople walked about in a daze, wondering how the change would affect them personally.

Tom and Caroline, bereft of their son, their property, and their position, quickly packed and left for North Carolina. Mary-Love and Manda Turk had time to do no more than take Caroline to lunch one day in Mobile and present her tearfully with a diamond-and-ruby brooch in the shape of a peacock. At this meal Mary-Love learned that it was Oscar, not herself and James, who possessed the former DeBordenave acreage. She was so humiliated and angered by James and Oscar's high-handedness in the matter that the next day without a word to anybody she took Sister and Miriam and Early on a two-week's trip to Cincinnati and Washington, D.C.

"They'll be back," said Elinor, without concern. "Mary-Love and Sister will take good care of Miriam. I'm not worried."

Nothing, in fact, could have disrupted Elinor's equanimity at this time. The big money of Perdido, which formerly had been partitioned equally among three families, was now divided between only two. Oscar, who had had no share of the wealth before, was now a man rich in timber-bearing land spread over three counties. Although Elinor might no longer be able to see the river from where she rocked in the swing, she continued to spend her afternoons on the upstairs porch, where she bounced Frances up and down on her knee and cooed, "Oh, my precious baby! One day your daddy

is going to own *all* the mills along the river. And one day we are going to have a whole *shoebox* full of land deeds, and every acre of land we own will have a river or a creek or a branch or a run on it for my precious baby to play in. And Frances and her mama will have more dresses and more pearls and more pretty things than everybody in the rest of Perdido put together!"

. . .

John Robert DeBordenave lay immolated in the levee, the town's right and savory sacrifice to the river whose name it bore. John Robert's death had permitted the levee to be completed and had given Oscar Caskey ownership of the land that would make the Caskey fortune even greater than Elinor herself dreamed. John Robert's parents had gone away from Perdido and gravel had stopped his mouth from calling out to them. Red clay had prevented his detached arms from waving them to return. Black dirt had held down his severed legs from running after them. But, torn, pinned, and buried though he lay, John Robert DeBordenave wasn't finished with Perdido, or the Caskeys, or the woman responsible for his death.

Chapter 27

The Closet

In the years following, Perdido grew considerably. The levee had been the primary cause for this increase in population, wealth, and prominence. Not all the men who had worked on it went away when it was finished. Some were offered jobs at the mills, took them, and settled down. The banks in Pensacola and Mobile, seeing that the future of the mills was protected by the embankments of earth, were now willing to lend money to the millowners for the expansion of their businesses. Both the Caskey and the Turk mills took advantage of this, bought more land, ordered more equipment, and together helped to finance a spur of railroad track from the mills up to the L&N line in Atmore. With this useful track and the larger trucks being produced by Detroit, the rivers were employed less and less for the transportation of felled trees and lumber. No longer were the Perdido and Blackwater rivers of overwhelming economic importance to the town.

Except for the business of the mutually advantageous construction of the railroad spur, the two lumber mills drew apart. Henry Turk's only idea was to do what he had always done, only much more of it. Oscar and James Caskey, on the other hand, realized that demand for lumber might not always be what it was today, and so decided to diversify. Accordingly, in 1927, James and Oscar purchased the dormitories on the other side of Baptist Bottom, and converted the buildings to a sash-door and window plant. Perdido's unemployment plummeted to nothing at all. The following year, a small veneer plant was added next to it, thus making it possible to utilize the bottomland hardwoods that did not otherwise provide profitable cutting.

Henry Turk laughed up his sleeve at the Caskeys, for these operations were patently not as profitable as the mere production of building lumber. The Caskeys were in debt for the capital they had needed to start up their new business, they had vastly larger payrolls, the demand for window sashes and hardwood veneers was troublesomely erratic and likely to remain so. The Caskeys ignored Henry Turk's laughter, and waited only for these new operations to become solvent before they established a plant to produce fence posts and utility poles.

It was Oscar's intention to appoint within the Caskey dominion a use for every part of a tree. Nothing should go to waste; everything should be turned to productiveness and value. Early Haskew was redesigning the town's steam plant so that it would run on the bark and dust that were a by-product of the cutting operations. Already the burning of waste was heating the kilns that dried the lumber and the pulp.

Of equal importance to Oscar was the maintenance of the forests. He hired men from the Auburn forestry department to come down and talk to him. Under their guidance, he instituted a system of selective cutting and intensive replanting. It was Oscar's goal—quickly achieved—to plant more trees than he cut down. He set up an experimental station near the ruins of Fort Mims, in hope of creating a more vigorous strain of yellow pine. He corresponded with agriculture departments all over the South, and at least once a year made inspection trips to other lumberyards from Texas to North Carolina.

Oscar's energy was surprising. He had certainly never done so much before. It was his work that had kept the mill going so well for the past decade, but all this extra business was something new. Perdido wasn't used to such quick expansion, such explosive innovation. Perdido tended to agree with Henry Turk, and considered that Oscar was spreading the mill and its resources too thin. Mary-Love occasionally complained to James that her son was running the mill into the ground, but James refused to interfere. Mary-Love wouldn't speak to her son directly about the family business because she knew that he would not heed her advice. She didn't want to put herself in the position of having any request refused.

As the years passed, it became gradually known that Elinor Caskey was actually the force behind her husband's spirited plans. If she didn't actually make the suggestions herself, then she at least kept him firmly spurred in those general paths of diversification and innovation. It was Elinor who sent him off to Spartanburg, South Carolina, to look at the big mills there, and over to Little Rock to see the new wire-box factory. Why Elinor would cause her husband to expend so much energy in a concern by which he would personally gain so little was unknown. If the mill made a great deal of money, then all the profit would be divided between Oscar's mother and uncle. He still would get only his salary. Mary-Love was a hearty, strong woman, not likely to die soon, and at that, no one put it past

her to leave all of her money to Sister and Early Haskew, in order to spite Elinor even from the grave.

Oscar was still very much in debt from the purchase of the DeBordenave land in 1924. He received money from the mill for trees harvested on his land, and this was used to pay the interest on the loan, but very little of the principal had yet been repaid, and what was left over from the lumber receipts kept his wife and daughter in decent clothes, but didn't pay for much else. He and Elinor were still very much in straitened circumstances.

"I sure do wish I could afford to take you to New York for a week or two," Oscar said to Elinor with a grimace.

"Don't even think about it, Oscar!" Elinor replied with unfeigned indifference. "You know we can't afford it, and besides, the Perdido River doesn't flow through New York, so why on earth would I want to go *there?"*

So long as she seemed assured of her husband's working hard and attempting to turn everything to advantage, Elinor was content. Mary-Love was always traveling to Mobile and Montgomery and New Orleans, buying dresses and lace tablecloths, when Elinor scarcely had an extra dime to replace the brown thread she had run out of. But Elinor did not complain. She sat in her house all day on the upstairs porch, rocking and sewing. She taught Frances, now five years old, to read and to write, so that she wouldn't have any difficulty when she began school. On most days, Elinor climbed up to the top of the levee, grasping the trunks of water oak saplings she had planted in its clayey sides, and strolled along the top, gazing in absorption into the red swirling water of the Perdido.

. . .

Frances could not remember a time when the sandy yard in back of the house led directly down to the river. She had known only the levee there, that thick sloping bank of red earth and clay, slowly covering itself in a mantle of water oak and kudzu. She wasn't allowed to climb it, unless her mother carried her up, and she wasn't allowed to stick her hand beneath the broad flat leaves of the rampaging kudzu, for snakes bred there in profusion. "And other things, too," Ivey Sapp claimed, "things just waiting to bite off a little white girl's hand." Frances was jealous of the children who were allowed to play on the levee, like Malcolm Strickland, who was

constantly riding his bike back and forth its entire length whenever he wasn't in school.

Elinor took her daughter boating in Bray Sugarwhite's little green boat. Frances couldn't hear often enough about how her mother had been rescued out of the Osceola Hotel by Oscar and Bray and taken to safety in this very same boat with Bray plying these very same paddles. Frances was frightened whenever they approached the junction and always held on tight to the sides of the boat. She tried her best not to show her fear, for that was disrespectful of her mother, who Frances thought was capable of just about anything. Elinor was certainly capable of shooting past the junction without Bray's little green boat being sucked down to the bottom of the riverbed, and proved it to Frances many times.

There was something otherworldly about floating down the river between those manmade hills of red clay. Frances knew that the houses and shops and sidewalks of Perdido lay just on the other side, but gliding along, she wasn't able even to see the clock tower of the town hall, and got no sense of human life being so close. She and her mother were in a solemn wilderness as deep and sublime as if they had been a thousand miles away from anyone but each other. "Oh," Elinor sighed once, and Frances didn't know whether her mother spoke to her or mused only to herself, "I used to hate the levee, hate the very idea of it, but days like this I row down the river and I remember what it was like before there *was* a Perdido and sawmills and bridges and cars."

"You *remember,* Mama?"

Elinor laughed, and seemed drawn back. "No, darling, I just imagine it…"

The town intruded upon the peace of the river between the levees only at the bridge that crossed the Perdido below the Osceola Hotel. Cars passed over the bridge now and then, and children on their bicycles, and there was almost always an old black woman, with a cane fishing pole and a cage of chirping crickets for bait, leaning on her elbows on the cement railing trying to save her husband the price of a slab of pork for supper.

Frances would have enjoyed these excursions except for a vague feeling she had that her mother expected her to say something or *feel* something that she neither said nor felt. Gazing into that swift-flowing water that was so muddy one couldn't even see a foot beneath the surface, Frances would have to shake her head no when her mother would say,

“Don’t you want to just dive right in?” Frances had learned to swim at Lake Pinchona, had taken readily to the clear artesian well water that filled the pool there, could dive and swim beneath the water and hold her breath longer than any of her friends. Her mother promised that if Frances ever wanted to swim in the Perdido she would protect her from the whirlpool at the junction, from the leeches along the banks, from the water moccasins, and from whatever else hid itself in the muddy current. “But you wouldn’t even have to worry about those things,” Elinor assured her daughter, “because you’re my little girl. This river is like home to me. One of these days it’ll be like home to you, too.”

Elinor never pressured Frances to swim in the river, and Frances never told her mother that it wasn’t fear that kept her from making the attempt, but rather the unsettling familiarity she felt with the Perdido. Not understanding that familiarity, she didn’t want to pursue it. Frances may have been only five, but was already possessed of vague memories of a time that seemed impossibly earlier. The Perdido belonged to that time, as did a child—a little boy her cousin Grace’s age—whom she sometimes remembered having played with in the linen passage between the front room and her own. But so far as she knew, she had never swum in the Perdido, and the little boy ranged in her memory without a name.

Frances was a tender child, and not much given to complaining. She never compared her lot to others’, never said to another little girl, “I hate doing this, don’t you?” or “It makes me so mad when Mama says that to me.” She imagined that every emotion that overtook her was peculiar to herself, could never be shared with anyone else, and certainly was never experienced by anyone else in Perdido. Thinking her own feelings of very little consequence, Frances never spoke them aloud, never sought to be praised or reassured or disabused or confirmed in anything she thought or felt.

Foremost among these rigidly maintained silences were Frances’s thoughts concerning the house she lived in. She knew a little of its story: her grandmother had built it as a wedding gift for her mother and her father, but had refused to let them have possession of it for a long while. Then Miriam had been born, and Mary-Love had said, “Give me Miriam and you can move into the house.” That was why Miriam lived with her grandmother, and that was why Frances was all alone.

In this story Frances saw nothing unusual, nothing cruel, nothing unfair. What concerned Frances was not the story of the bartering of Miriam for her parents' freedom, but rather what had happened in the house itself during the time that it lay empty. This concern was prompted by Ivey Sapp, Mary-Love's cook, who had told Frances the story in the first place one day while Frances was sitting in the kitchen of her grandmother's house.

Frances had been entranced by the idea of sheets placed over all the furniture.

"You mean," Frances had asked, "that my house just sat there all locked up and empty? That's funny."

"No, it ain't," returned Ivey. "Not funny one bit. Ain't no house that's empty. Something always moving in. You just got to make sure it's *people* that gets in there first."

"What you talking about, Ivey?"

"Nothing," replied Ivey. "What I'm saying is, child, is you cain't have a big house like that just sitting there with nobody in it, and all the furniture covered up in sheets and them little stickers still on the windowpanes and all the keys in the doors, and not have somebody move in it. And when I say *somebody* I don't necessarily mean white folks and I don't necessarily mean black folks."

"Indians?"

"Not Indians neither."

"Then what?"

Ivey paused, then said, "If you ain't seen 'em, then it don't matter, do it, child?"

"I haven't seen anybody there but Mama and Daddy and Zaddie and me. Who else lives there?"

They were interrupted by Frances's grandmother, who came in just then and remarked, "Does your mama let you gallivant all day long without supervision, child?"

Frances was sent home before she could discover who else might inhabit the house in which she lived.

. . .

Frances recalled that conversation for a long time, though she forgot completely why she had been in Mary-Love's kitchen when she was so rarely at her grandmother's house and almost never there alone. Sometimes she even thought it had been only a dream, it seemed so disconnected from

any other memory. But she never could figure out whether Ivey's pronouncements affected her attitude toward her home or whether it only confirmed something she had already begun to feel.

Frances thought she ought to love the house. It was big—the biggest in town—and had many rooms. She had a room of her own and her own bath and her own closet. The hallways were wide and long. There was stained glass in all the outside doors and on the parlor windows, so that in the afternoon the sun painted all the floors in brilliant colors. If Frances sat in that colored light and held a mirror out in front of her, she herself was painted vermilion and cobalt and sea green. The house had more porches than any house in town. On the first floor there was an open porch in front, narrow and long, with green wicker rocking chairs and ferns. Above it was another porch, opening from the second-floor hallway, the same size, with more rocking chairs and a table with magazines. In back on the first floor was the kitchen porch, latticed over so that it remained cool in the summer. On the second floor in the back was the biggest of all, the sleeping porch, screened, looking out at the levee and Miss Mary-Love's house, with swings and hammocks, ferns, hooked rugs, gliders, fringed standing lamps, and little tables. Frances's own bedroom had one window that looked out over her grandmother's house, and one that opened directly onto this screened porch. It was the most delicious feeling, Frances thought, to go to the window of her room and look out and see what was essentially another room. At night, when she went to sleep, she could turn in her bed and look out that window through soft gauze curtains and see the silhouettes of her mother and father, rocking slowly in the swing and speaking in soft voices so as not to disturb her. Sometimes Frances stood on the sleeping porch and looked through the window into her own room and was always astounded at how different it appeared from that perspective.

Outside, the house was painted a bright white, as were nearly all the houses in Perdido, but the interior was dim and dusky. The sunlight never penetrated far into the rooms. The paper on the walls was all in dark subtle patterns. On all the windows were amber canvas shades, venetian blinds, gauze curtains, and then lined draperies. In the summer, all these were kept tightly drawn against the heat, and opened only at dusk. Moonlit nights frequently brought more natural light into the house than the brightest summer afternoons.

The house also had an odor that was peculiar to it, a mixture of the sun-bleached sand that surrounded the house, of the red clay of the levee, of the Perdido that flowed on the other side of the levee, of the mustiness of the dark walls and wide dark rooms, of Zaddie's cooking in the kitchen, and of something that had come with the emptiness of the house and never quite gone away. Even in months of drought, when the farmers' crops shriveled in the fields and the forests were so dry that a stroke of heat lightning could ignite whole acres within five minutes, the house had a slight odor of river water, so that the papered walls seemed damp to the touch and new envelopes stuck down and pie pastry didn't come out right. It could seem that the entire house was enveloped in an invisible mist that had risen from the Perdido.

These were Frances's principal perceptions of the house in which she lived, but there were impressions that were more obscure, less tangible, felt immediately upon waking and immediately lost, or fashioned in the last moment before sleep and never recalled, or sensed so fleetingly as never to be recovered whole. But a hundred of these impressions, added up and tied together with the string of Ivey's words and hints, left Frances with the distinct impression that she and her parents and Zaddie were not alone in the house.

Frances's fear of the house was confined to the front room—the bedroom at the front of the second floor. One window of this room overlooked her grandmother's house, and a second opened onto the narrow front porch. The room had been set aside for guests, but Frances's parents never had visitors who remained overnight. Between this room and Frances's was a small passage with a door on either side fitted with cedar shelving for the storing of linens. It seemed to Frances that whatever was in the front room could come right through that passage and open the door of hers without her parents—across the wide corridor—knowing anything of it. Every night before Frances would get into bed, she'd make certain that the door of that passage was locked.

When Zaddie was cleaning the front room, Frances sometimes ventured in, despite her ravening fear. She'd hang about and in great dread search for evidence to confirm her fear that the room was inhabited. Even as she did this, Frances knew in her heart of hearts that whatever lived there lived not in the room proper, but in the closet of that room.

In the center of the back wall of the front room was a fireplace with black and cream tiles and a coal-burning grate. To the left of this was the door to the passage that led to Frances's room and to the right of it was a small closet. Here were agglomerated Frances's first fears of the house. The door of that closet was the most frightening thing Frances could imagine existing anywhere. It was misshapen, smaller than any other door in the house, only about four and a half feet high, when all the others were at least seven. To Frances's emotional reasoning, it seemed that anything that hid in that closet must be smaller than anything that might wait for her beyond any other door, and she feared dreadfully that aberration of size. In this closet, Frances's mother kept the clothes she wore least, but still wanted to preserve: out-of-season dresses, overcoats, shoes, handbags, oversized hats. It smelled of naphtha, feathers, and fur. Opened, the closet presented one flat expanse of leather and cloth and dark spangles. Because there was no light in it, Frances had no idea how far it extended either to the sides or to the back. To her imagination, it had no firm dimensions at all, but expanded or contracted according to the whim of whatever creature took its shelter within.

Any house built on pilings, as all the Caskey houses were, is bound to shake a little under stray footfalls and other movements. Glass rattled in the dining room cabinets. Doors slipped on their latches. This Frances understood logically, but it still seemed to her that that closet was the echo point for all the vibrations in the house. That closet shook with every step that was taken. It treasured up stray noises. When it thought no one was paying attention, it instituted the noises and the vibrations and the shakings itself.

All this Frances knew, and of all this Frances would say nothing to anyone.

However, when it appeared that she was to be left alone in the house, as sometimes happened in the afternoon, Frances made some excuse to visit Grace two houses down, or begged permission to walk over to the Stricklands. If permission was denied, or no excuse could be found to go away, Frances did not remain alone inside. She waited patiently on the front steps until someone returned. If it was raining, she sat on the front porch in the chair nearest the steps, so that if she heard something moving inside, she would have a clear exit out into the yard. At these unhappy times, Frances did not even turn and peer through the stained glass into the parlor

windows, fearful of what might peer back at her. To the little girl the house seemed a gigantic head, and she only a morsel of meat conveniently positioned in its gaping mouth. The front porch was that grinning mouth, the white porch railing its lower teeth, the ornamental wooden frieze above its upper teeth, the painted wicker chair on which she perched its green wagging tongue. Frances sat and rocked and wondered when the jaws would clamp shut.

As soon as anyone returned, the house seemed for a time to lose all its threatening malevolence. Frances skipped blithely in behind Zaddie or behind her mother, and wondered at her own foolishness. In that first flush of bravery, Frances would run upstairs, fly to the door of the front room, peer in, and grin at the fact that there was nothing there at all. Sometimes she'd pull open a drawer of the dresser, and other times she'd drop to her knees and check under the bed—but she'd never go so far as to touch the knob of the closet door.

III: The House

Chapter 28

Miriam and Frances

Frances and Miriam Caskey were sisters born scarcely a year apart. They lived next door to each other in houses that were no more than a few dozen yards distant. Yet, so little commerce was maintained between their respective households that when they did meet—on the rare occasions of Caskey state—the sisters were shy and mistrustful.

While Miriam was the elder by only about twelve months, in maturity she seemed to outdistance her sister by years. Reared in the house with her grandmother Mary-Love Caskey and her aunt Sister Haskew, until Sister and her husband moved away, Miriam had been fondled and coddled and pampered for every waking moment of her seven years. This indulgence had become more marked since 1926, when Sister, at last disgusted beyond endurance by her mother's interferences and meddlesomeness, persuaded her husband to move to Mississippi. Mary-Love and Miriam had been left alone in their rambling house, and were one another's company and solace. It was a common remark in Perdido that Miriam was just like Mary-Love, and not a bit like her own mother, who lived right next door and saw Miriam less often than she saw the hairdresser.

Miriam, like all the Caskeys, was slender and tall, and Mary-Love saw to it that she was always dressed in the best of childhood fashion. Miriam was a neat, fastidious child; she talked nearly constantly, but never loudly. Her conversation turned mostly on what things she had seen in the possession of others, what things she had recently acquired, what things she still coveted. Miriam had her own room, with furniture specially bought for it. She herself had picked out the miniature rolltop desk from the showroom of a furniture store in Mobile. She loved its multitude of tiny drawers. Now every one of those tiny drawers was filled with things: buttons, lace, pieces of cheap jewelry, pencils, small porcelain figurines of dogs, spangles, ribbons, scraps of colored paper, and other such pretty detritus that could be gathered up in a household rich in worldly goods. Miriam occupied herself for hours on end quietly looking through these items, rearranging them, stacking them, counting them, making records of them in a neat ledger, and scheming to get more.

The possessions, however, that afforded Miriam Caskey greatest pleasure were those she was not allowed to keep in her room. These were the diamonds and emeralds and pearls that her grandmother presented to her on Christmas, on her birthday, and on a few otherwise run-of-the-mill days in between, and then hid away in a safety-deposit box in Mobile. “You are too young to keep this jewelry yourself,” Mary-Love said to her beloved granddaughter, “but you should always remember that it’s yours.”

Miriam had a confused view of adulthood and wasn’t sure that she would ever reach that exalted state. While she couldn’t be certain that the jewels would ever be given over to her direct possession, this didn’t matter in the least to her. Thoughts of those jewels, in the distant, locked, silent safety-deposit box in Mobile always entered her mind before going to sleep every night and seemed almost to make up for the lullaby her real mother would never sing to her.

Frances Caskey was very different. While Miriam was energetic and robust and strung together with a wiry nervous tension, Frances seemed to have a tenuous hold on her body and her health. Frances caught colds and fevers with dismaying ease; she developed allergies and brief undiagnosed illnesses with the frequency with which other children scraped their knees. She was timid in general, and would no more have thought it her prerogative to be jealous of her sister or her sister’s possessions than she would have thought it her right to declare herself Queen of All the Americas.

Frances spent every day with Zaddie Sapp, shyly carrying and fetching in the kitchen, or following Zaddie about the house, sitting quietly in a corner with her feet carefully raised off the floor while Zaddie swept and dusted and polished. Frances was well behaved, never out of sorts, patient in sickness, willing—even eager—to perform any act or task delegated to her. Her self-effacement was so pronounced that her grandmother—on those rare occasions when Mary-Love saw her—would shake her by the shoulders, and cry, “Perk up, child! Where’s your gumption? You act like there’s somebody waiting to jump out from behind the door and grab you!”

Every weekday morning, Frances would slip out onto the front porch on the second floor of the house and surreptitiously watch for her sister to leave for school. Miriam, always in a freshly starched dress and nicely polished shoes, would come out with her books and seat herself carefully in the back of the Packard. Miss Mary-Love would come out onto the porch,

and call out, “Bray, come drive Miriam to school!” Bray would stand up from his gardening, brush off his hands, and drive away with Miriam, who always sat as still and composed and stately as if she were on her way to be presented to the Queen of England. In the afternoon, when Frances saw Bray driving off again, she would station herself to witness the return of her sister, as starched and polished and unruffled as when she had departed in the morning.

Frances wasn’t jealous of her sister, but she was in awe of her, and she treasured memories of the few occasions when Miriam had spoken a kind word to her. Clasped around her neck, Frances wore the thin gold chain and locket that Miriam had given her the previous Christmas. It didn’t matter one bit that afterward, Miriam had whispered to her, “Grandmama picked it out. Ivey found a box. They put my name on it, but I never even saw it. I wouldn’t have spent all that money on you.”

. . .

In the autumn of 1928, Frances was eager to enter the first grade. She occupied herself relentlessly with the question of whether she would be allowed to ride with Miriam and Bray to school every morning. She dared not put the question to her parents directly for fear the answer would be no. The thought of being allowed to sit beside Miriam in the back seat of the Packard made Frances quiver in expectation. She daydreamed of intimacy with Miriam.

When the first day of school finally arrived, Zaddie put Frances into her best dress. Oscar kissed his daughter, and Elinor told her to be very good and very smart. Frances went expectantly out the front door alone—it seemed for the very first time in her whole life—only to see her grandmother’s Packard roll off down the street with Bray behind the wheel. Starched and polished Miriam sat all alone in the back.

Frances dropped onto the steps and wept.

Oscar marched across to his mother’s house, entered without knocking, and angrily said to Mary-Love, “Mama, how in creation could you let Bray drive off and leave poor little Frances sitting on the front steps?”

“Oh,” said Mary-Love, with the appearance of surprise, “was Frances intending on riding with Miriam?”

“Well, you know she was, Mama. It’s her first day at school. Miriam could have shown her where to go.”

“Miriam couldn’t have done that,” returned Mary-Love hastily. “She might have been late. I cain’t let Miriam be late on her first day at school.”

Oscar sighed. “Miriam wouldn’t have been late, Mama. Poor Frances is just sitting on the steps, weeping bitter tears.”

“I cain’t help that,” replied Mary-Love, unperturbed.

“Well, tell me this, Mama,” Oscar went on, “are you gone let my little girl ride with Bray and Miriam from now on?”

Mary-Love pondered this a moment, then replied at last, grudgingly: “If she insists on it, Oscar. But only if she’s out there waiting in the car when Miriam comes out of this house. I’m not gone have black marks against Miriam because Frances cain’t get herself dressed on time.”

“Mama,” said Oscar, “are you forgetting that I pay half of Bray’s salary?”

“Are you forgetting it’s *my* automobile?”

Oscar was furious. On this first day of his daughter’s scholastic career, he drove Frances to school himself, showed her to the proper room, and introduced her to her teacher. At dinnertime, he told his wife what Mary-Love had said.

“Oscar,” said Elinor, “your mama treats Frances like the dirt under her feet. I hate to think how many diamonds she has bought for Miriam. I hate to think what that child is worth in rubies and pearls alone. That locket they sent over here at Christmas must have cost all of seventy-five cents. I’m not going to have Miss Mary-Love do us any favors. We are not going to allow Frances to ride in that car—not once. People in town will *see* how Miss Mary-Love treats her own granddaughter!”

Frances, who had enjoyed such high hopes for closeness with her sister, knew no intimacy at all. Every morning, Zaddie took Frances’s hand and walked her all the way to school—in fact, all the way to the door of the schoolroom—and left her there. Sometimes Bray and Miriam would pass them in the road, but Miriam wouldn’t even wave or nod to her sister. On the playground, Miriam would not play in any game in which her sister took part. “I’m in the second grade,” said Miriam to her sister on a rare occasion that she suffered herself to speak to her, “and I know *this* much more than you!” As Miriam spread her arms to their widest extent, Frances was crushed by the sense of her own inferiority.

Mary-Love’s neglect of her second grandchild was not lost on Miriam, who had grown actively to despise her sister. She was embarrassed by

Frances's shyness, her inferior wardrobe, her dependence on Zaddie Sapp for companionship and affection, her lack of knowledge concerning real jewels, real crystal, and good china.

Miriam's feelings about Frances were intensified during the first weeks of December, when the first and second grades of the Perdido Elementary School began their Christmas Seal campaigns. Miriam thought that selling door-to-door like a man with vacuum cleaners was an activity beneath her. She decided only to repeat her previous year's performance and sell a few dollar's worth of the seals to Mary-Love and to Queenie, so as not simply to have a zero placed next to her name on the special chalkboards set up in the school hallway.

Frances, however, took the business very seriously—in her small way—and set out to sell as many of the seals as she could; her teacher had told her it was a worthy cause. With Oscar's permission, Frances paid a visit to the mill and went through the offices approaching all the workers. Frances was so diffident, so slight, and so charming in her own way that everyone bought a large quantity. Her great-uncle James Caskey and his daughter Grace then purchased more seals than all the millworkers combined. Before she knew it, Frances had sold more than anyone else on the first grade board.

Miriam was astonished and humiliated by Frances's success. Suddenly nothing in the world was more important than beating her sister at selling Christmas Seals. Mary-Love, not understanding the importance of the matter to her granddaughter, resisted buying any more than she could use. So Miriam went next door to James and to Grace, who claimed that they would like to oblige her, but were all bought out. Miriam went to the mill, under James's aegis, but everyone there had already opened his purse to Frances. Miriam even swallowed enough pride to knock upon a few doors, but since it was late in the campaign, everyone who might have been persuaded to buy had already bought his seals.

In despair, she went to her grandmother and explained her dilemma. Contrary to Miriam's expectations, Mary-Love was by no means angry with her. "You mean to tell me, Miriam darling, that that little girl next door is gone beat you out—and you're in the second grade and she's in the first?"

"James and Grace bought so many, Grandmama. And they wouldn't buy a single seal from me!"

"They wouldn't? And they bought from Frances?"

Miriam nodded glumly. “I hate Frances!”

“I am *not* gone let Elinor Caskey’s child beat you out. How much has she sold so far? Do you know?”

“Thirty-five dollars and thirty-five cents.”

“And how much have *you* sold?”

“Three dollars and ten cents.”

“And when is the contest over?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“All right, then,” said Mary-Love, lowering her voice. “I tell you what, Miriam. After school tomorrow, you go find out if Frances has sold any more. Then you bring me her total, you understand?”

And on the final day of the sale of the Christmas Seals, Miriam Caskey brought in forty-two dollars, an astounding sum considering that everybody in Perdido had drawersful of the things by now, and that up to that point Miriam had brought in no more than three dollars. When her teacher asked her who in the world had bought so many, Miriam replied, “I knocked on every door in town. I near ’bout walked my legs off.”

The Caskey sisters came in first and second in the contest, but Miriam beat her sister by almost seven dollars. Miriam won a Bible with six illustrations in color and all of Jesus’s words printed in red. Frances got a box of Whitman’s candy.

After the presentation of the awards, Frances opened her box of candy and offered it to her sister, telling her to take as much of it as she wanted. But as Miriam bit into the largest piece she could find, liquid cherry squirted out over the front of her starched dress. “Ugh!” she cried, “it’s your fault, Frances! Look at me now!” And with a fling of her hand she knocked the box out of Frances’s grasp, spilling all the chocolates into the dirt of the schoolyard.

. . .

The rivalry that appeared to exist between the estranged sisters was emblematic of the much greater rivalry that had risen between Elinor Caskey and her mother-in-law, Mary-Love. Through those two little girls was played out, in distorting miniature, the passion that characterized the relationship of their mother and grandmother. Mary-Love was the undisputed head of the Caskey family, having acceded to that position upon the death of her husband many years before. No one had challenged her authority before the arrival in Perdido of Elinor Dammert. With single-

minded energy that had matched Mary-Love's own best weapons, Elinor had arranged to be courted by and married to Mary-Love's only son, Oscar.

The two women had quite different styles. Elinor didn't have Mary-Love's bluster; her ways were more insidious. Elinor bided her time; her strokes were quick, clean, and always unexpected. Mary-Love knew this, and in the last few years she had grown restive, as if waiting for the blow that would topple her. Mary-Love's antipathy toward her daughter-in-law had grown strident and unbecoming. Perdido talked, and the talk was always against Mary-Love. It was one thing to disapprove of a son's wife; it was another to make that dislike so widely known. Mary-Love eventually had come to see that it simply would not do to give Elinor battle directly. Elinor remained cool, always seeming to contemplate the skirmish beyond the one that hotly occupied Mary-Love. Elinor gave way strategically, and then flashed her sword just at the moment that Mary-Love was raising her arm to claim victory. Like a palsied general, Mary-Love decided to retire from the field, but did not give up the war.

In her granddaughter Miriam, Mary-Love had an eager, conscienceless, and bloodthirsty little soldier. And Frances, Elinor's representative, was a sickly enemy—timid and weaponless. A skirmish between the sisters would incontestably give the victory to Mary-Love's side. Daily, Mary-Love wrapped up her granddaughter in her prettiest dresses and shiniest shoes, kissed her on the cheek, and whispered, "Give no quarter..."

There was no satisfaction, however, for either Miriam or her grandmother, in these easy victories, because Frances didn't fight at all. She looked around with puzzlement, not even realizing that she had wandered onto a field of battle. If she had seen fit, Elinor might have instructed her daughter in matters of combat and strategy, but Elinor had done nothing. Perdido talked about the two little girls, as before they had talked about Elinor and Mary-Love. Perdido's conclusion was that Miriam was disagreeable and much too big for her britches, and that Frances was as sweet as sweet could be. *That* said something about the two households in which the children were reared.

Thus, by sending out her emissary unarmed, unprepared, and even ignorant of the fact that war had been declared, Elinor had gained the day. How long would it be, Mary-Love wondered uncomfortably, before Elinor stormed the citadel itself, and claimed supremacy over the Caskey clan?

Why had she not done it yet? If she waited for a sign or portent, what was it? How might Mary-Love prepare herself against that inevitable day? And when the two women came to do battle, what casualties would be borne bloody and broken from the field of conflict?

Chapter 29

The Coins in Queenie's Pocket

Queenie Strickland, after a tumultuous appearance in Perdido six years earlier, had settled down. She and her children had taken on a greater identity than mere penurious offshoots of the Caskeys. It was generally known in Perdido that Queenie's third child Daniel Joseph—universally called Danjo from the hour of his birth—was the result of a rape committed on Queenie by her estranged husband. It had also become generally known that Danjo's father was no good, that Queenie wanted no reconciliation, and that Danjo was much better off growing up without even having seen so much as a photograph of his father.

Queenie had gained a reputation in Perdido of being a sponger. The designation, though accurate, was repugnant to her. Shortly after the birth of her third child, she announced to James that she intended to seek employment. James, not wishing anyone else in town shouldering a burden he considered his own, appointed her his personal secretary. His sense of responsibility toward his unfortunate and indigent sister-in-law was greater than his doubt as to the extent of her clerical abilities and his misgivings as to what their daily propinquity at the mill office would be like.

In the summer of 1925, James had sent Queenie to Pensacola to take a typing course at the mechanics college there and thereby gave her a much needed rest from the demands of Malcolm, Lucille, and little Danjo. James would not have these rambunctious children in his own home, filled as it was with much that was fragile and valuable, but instead sent Grace over to Queenie's to care for them there.

When Queenie returned, she was proficient at the typewriter, and in a short time she became indispensable to her brother-in-law, providing pencils, advice, coffee, a sympathetic ear, and freedom from obtrusive callers. She proved her worth, both in her official and private capacities, far beyond anything James Caskey could have imagined, and Queenie quickly came to know everything there was to know concerning the running of the Caskey mill. Since Queenie was close to Elinor, Elinor in turn learned what little her husband had not already told her. Queenie had long before been trained as Elinor's spy, and she retained that position now.

Queenie's intimacy with James Caskey and Elinor helped her to feel more secure and thus she became calmer. During her first year or so in Perdido she had not hesitated to employ a gushing hypocrisy to get what she wanted; she had mooned over James's crystal, echoed Elinor's decrying of the levee construction, and nodded vigorously at the list of the wrongs Mary-Love perceived had been made against her. She learned how quickly all this had been seen through by the Caskeys, and now she took great care to examine her own feelings on any matter and always expressed those feelings cautiously. Honesty in this case proved by far the best policy, though Queenie employed truthfulness exactly as she had employed hypocrisy—as a means to an end, and not as a thing to be appreciated for itself.

Although her principal struggle had apparently been won—Carl Strickland remaining mercifully absent from the scene—Queenie experienced her share of trials. These usually involved her children, and centered mostly on Malcolm, her eldest. He was ten, in the fourth grade, and prone to many minor mischiefs. He broke windows in abandoned houses, pocketed small items at the Ben Franklin store, and went swimming in the upper Perdido, where he was in some danger of being sucked down to the junction and drowned. He threw sand through the screens of Miss Elinor's kitchen in order to annoy Zaddie Sapp. He knocked his teacher's plants off the windowsill for the pleasure of hearing the pots smash on the pavement below. He threw potatoes at little girls. He stole his friends' marbles. He was loud and raucous. He insulted every Negro child who crossed his path, and he continued to indulge every opportunity of punching his brother and his sister in the stomach. Every time the telephone rang in James's office Queenie feared it would be another call complaining of Malcolm's behavior.

Eight-year-old Lucille was easier on her mother's nerves, but still caused Queenie a fair amount of grief. Lucille was sneaky, although Queenie would never voice this appraisal of her daughter, even to Elinor. Lucille lied when it suited her purpose. Lucille couldn't be tucked into bed without her whispering in her mother's ear some wrong she had suffered at her brother's hand. If she decided she needed a new pair of shoes, she wasn't above climbing the levee—against all orders—and deliberately kicking one of her best patent leathers into the muddy water of the Perdido and therewith validating her desire.

For the third child, four-year-old Danjo, Queenie held great hope. He was remarkably different from his siblings; he was everything they were not. He was calm, quiet, truthful, pleasant, and well-behaved. It was as if his whole being had been sobered by an intuitive knowledge of the unhappy circumstances of his conception. He was the only one of Queenie's children James would allow into his house, the only one Mary-Love would stoop down and kiss, and the only one Elinor invited to sit beside her on the swing. Danjo acted as if he lived only by the generous sufferance of the whole world, and that if he performed any untoward act or spoke any unsuitable word he would be picked up by one hundred hands and mercilessly hurled into the river. It was generally considered a point in Danjo's favor that neither his sister nor his brother liked him. During his nightly bath, Queenie generally found some new bruise or pinch mark that had been surreptitiously administered by either Malcolm or Lucille. The teachers in the school sighed in relief as Malcolm passed on up a grade, bore with stony resignation the presence of untrustworthy Lucille, and all sighed the same thought: *Lord, I can hardly wait till I get that precious child Danjo Strickland. After Malcolm and Lucille I will have earned him!*

Of her husband's doings, whereabouts, and condition Queenie had heard absolutely nothing. She thought there was a strong possibility that since he had not showed up again he was being prevented from doing so by the interposition of iron bars and prison walls. Whatever the case, Queenie knew that she would be protected from Carl by James and Oscar, who had come to her aid before, but still she always feared being taken by surprise. At night her house was locked tighter than any other home in Perdido, and an intruder might have got into the Perdido bank with greater ease at the same hour. When Queenie sat on her front porch she always had an escape route should she see Carl come walking down the street. Every strange automobile pulling up before the house caused her trepidation. She dreaded the postman because he might be delivering a message from Carl. She hated to pick up the telephone at home for fear Carl's voice would greet her on the other end.

But all her precautions were of no avail; when Carl did return, Queenie was wholly unprepared for the hour and the manner of his arrival.

. . .

He was simply sitting on her porch one afternoon when she came home from work. Danjo was held an unhappy captive on his father's lap. Lucille

and Malcolm stood inside the safety of the house, wildly gesticulating to their mother through the screen door.

"Ma!" cried Malcolm in a stage whisper as she came up the steps, "we locked the door. We wouldn't let him inside."

"Hey, Queenie," said Carl softly, "how you?"

He was wearing a suit, and looked uncomfortable in it.

Queenie suddenly felt herself borne down with the weight of the world. She realized how happy she had been for the past five years, how she hadn't known a moment of *real* disquietude, had never gone without money or company or—she was astonished to think it for the first time—respect. With the reappearance of her husband in Perdido, all of that instantly vanished.

"What you doing back here, Carl?"

"Came to see you, Queenie. Where'd this here boy come from?"

Queenie didn't answer.

"Been lonesome, Queenie?" he asked with a leer.

"No," she returned. "Not one single little bit." She waved Malcolm and Lucille away from the door. They retreated a few steps, but returned almost immediately as soon as their mother's back was turned. Queenie seated herself in the rocker across from Carl. "Give me my baby," she said.

"Whose baby is he?" said Carl, not letting go of Danjo.

"He's yours."

"You sure, Queenie? Maybe you made a mistake."

"I didn't make any mistake. Danjo, come here."

Carl said, "Kiss your daddy."

Danjo wriggled out of Carl's grasp and fled to his mother's lap.

"Where you been?" asked Queenie. She didn't look at her husband, but stared out across the street.

"Here and there."

"What pen were you in?"

"Tallahassee." He grinned.

"What for this time?"

"Never you mind."

Queenie was silent a moment, then she said, "Carl, I want you to go away. Me and Malcolm and Lucille and Danjo don't need you. We don't want you."

“I cain’t desert my family, Queenie. What kind of man you take me for?”

“I don’t intend to argue,” said Queenie with weariness and despair pervading her voice. “I just want you to go away from this town and never come back again.”

“Oh, Queenie, you cain’t get rid of me. I’m your husband. I got legal rights. I got my children here that need me. That Malcolm’s a fine one, I tell you. That Lucille’s a little doll! And this boy Danjo, I’m gone help you bring him up right.”

Queenie stood and headed toward the door. Carl rose quickly and followed her.

“Unhook the screen,” Queenie said to Malcolm. She was carrying Danjo and shifted him in her arms.

“I don’t want him in here!” screamed Lucille.

“Baby girl!” cried Carl.

“Unhook the screen,” Queenie repeated.

Malcolm sullenly did so. Queenie slipped inside; Carl followed her in.

“Have you got a bag?” Queenie asked.

“Out on the porch, Queenie. Didn’t you see it?”

“I saw it.” She reached in her purse and took out five dollars. “Go take it over to the Osceola.”

He snatched the five dollars from her. “I can use this, but I tell you, I ain’t gone waste it on no hotel. I’m gone stay right here.”

“No,” said Queenie.

“Yes,” he said, taking her arm and squeezing it hard.

Queenie’s neck stretched with the pain, but she said nothing.

Carl slipped the five dollars into his pocket and let go of his wife’s arm. “Queenie, I sure am thirsty,” he said in a light, conversational voice. “You think you could fix me some iced tea?”

Carl sat down on the sofa and motioned his children over to him. Queenie looked at her husband, but there was no intelligible message in her gaze. She went into the kitchen, calling after her, “Lucille, I need some help.”

While Malcolm and Danjo sat uncomfortably on either side of their father and answered the questions put to them, Queenie in the kitchen whispered to her daughter, “Go out the back way. Run over to Elinor’s and tell her your daddy has come back. She’ll know what to do.”

Lucille took off immediately, allowing the back door to slam shut behind her. A moment later Carl pushed open the kitchen door. “Was that my baby girl going somewhere?”

“I sent her to tell the Caskeys that you’d come back.”

“So they can come greet me, tell me how glad they are to see me back in Perdido?”

“No,” said Queenie. “So they can get you out of town. On a rail. Tied to the back of a mule. Floating down the river on the back of a log.”

“They got me out once, sugar, but I wasn’t smart. I learned me a few things in the Tallahassee pen. Now I turned smart. I’m your lawful wedded husband, Queenie, and I’m gone stay around and help raise up my precious babies. I sent that boy Malcolm out on the porch and he’s gone bring in my bag. Those Caskeys aren’t gone be able to do a thing. I’m here to stay, Queenie. I look around, what do I see? I see a nice house. I see my babies and my wife. I see plenty to eat. Is there one reason on earth why I should go away?”

Queenie didn’t reply. She handed him a glass of iced tea and walked out of the kitchen and back into the living room. Danjo sat on the sofa, weeping softly.

. . .

But it wasn’t all that easy to get rid of Queenie’s husband. Oscar went over to speak to Carl and Carl said, “Who’s gone throw me out of town? Where’s your gun? You gone shoot me? Where’s your law-man? He gone arrest me for visiting my wife? He gone put me in jail for bouncing my little boy up and down on my knee?”

Aubrey Wiggins had been sheriff the first time Carl Strickland had showed up in Perdido. Wiggins assisted Oscar in driving the unwanted man out of town. Now Aubrey was dead, and his place had been taken by Charley Key. Charley was Perdido’s youngest sheriff ever. He was hotheaded and quick to take offense. He was particularly chary of doing favors or of having favors done for him. It was thought generally that in a few years he would see the light and then things would be accomplished with the ease and smoothness that had characterized his predecessor’s administration. But for right now, Sheriff Key wasn’t listening when Oscar came to him and said, “Mr. Key, I need you to back me up with Queenie Strickland’s husband. He’s no good and he ought to be run out of town.”

“What’s he done?”

“He’s bothering her.”

“How’s he bothering her, Mr. Caskey?”

“He’s moved in on her.”

“Aren’t they married?”

“They are.”

“Then what’s to stop him? A husband and a wife ought pretty much to be together. That’s about the way I’ve always heard it.”

“James and I want him to leave. He’s making Queenie unhappy, and we care a great deal for Queenie, Mr. Key.”

“I know Queenie Strickland,” replied the sheriff. “What I know of her, I like. I haven’t met her husband. Where’s he been?”

“Florida pen,” said Oscar in a low voice. This wasn’t general knowledge in Perdido, and his tone of conspiracy was a plea for the sheriff to keep the information to himself.

“What for?”

“Don’t know. But probably just about anything you care to name.”

“Is he out free and clear?”

“He says he is.”

“Then there’s nothing I can do.”

“He’s making Queenie *real* unhappy, Mr. Key.”

“Lots of unhappy marriages. I cain’t always be stepping in between a husband and a wife. Tell you what I will do, though. I’ll call up Tallahassee and make sure he hasn’t escaped. If he’s escaped from the pen, then I’ll go after him. If he hasn’t, then there’s not one thing in the world I can do, Mr. Caskey.”

Sheriff Key wanted to show Oscar and the other Caskeys that their prominence in Perdido brought them no special treatment from the forces of order and justice. This Oscar understood, but he knew it was Queenie who would suffer on account of the sheriff’s procedural niceties. Oscar decided not to argue with the sheriff any longer. He returned home to where his wife and Queenie were waiting on the porch and related the disappointing news.

Elinor was incensed, but her anger could not persuade Mr. Key, and without Mr. Key nothing at all could be done.

Queenie said to Oscar and Elinor: “That man made my life miserable in Nashville, and he’s gone ruin my life here, too. You know what it’s gone be like to come home from work every day just knowing he’s sitting there on the porch, wanting to know what I’m gone fix him for supper?”

“Oscar,” said Elinor, “why don’t you just run over there with your gun and shoot him? Queenie and I will wait here till you get back.”

“Elinor, I’m not gone shoot Carl Strickland. Queenie, you think if I offered him money, he’d go away? That must be why he’s here, right? ’Cause you’ve got a job and a house and all?”

“Won’t work,” sighed Queenie. “James offered him two hundred dollars a month if he’d go live two states away. Carl wouldn’t take it. Carl said he wanted to be near his ‘darling babies.’ I tell y’all, I am afraid for those children. It hasn’t been easy raising them on my own. Poor old Malcolm sure hasn’t come out the way I wanted him to. He gets in a lot of trouble already. I hate to think what Carl is gone do to ’em!”

“Oscar, I really do think you ought to go over and shoot that man!”

“You want me in jail, Elinor? That’s where I’d be. You’d have to come visit me up in the Atmore pen. I’d be out in the hot sun digging potatoes all day. That’s what murderers do up there in Atmore.”

Nothing could be done. Oscar’s threats remained vague without the force of the law behind them. Carl had served his sentence in full for holding up a pharmacy in DeFuniak Springs and pistol-whipping the proprietor. He could now be accused of doing nothing that was against the law. He wasn’t working. What need had he of employment when his wife worked and pulled down good money, when the house was hers free and clear, and when there was food on the table and clothing on his childrens’ backs?

Queenie was miserable. Whenever James came into her office, he’d find her attempting to cover up the fact that she’d been crying. Kindly, he always attempted to persuade his distraught sister-in-law that Carl’s residence was only temporary. “When the time comes, I’ll up my offer. And one day, I’ll name his price. Soon enough, Queenie, he’ll be moving on.”

Carl had taken over his wife’s bedroom. Queenie slept on the sofa in the living room or sometimes with Lucille.

How Carl spent his days no one was certain. After James picked Queenie up in the morning, Carl often took his wife’s car and drove off somewhere. Someone told Elinor she had seen him at the racetrack in Cantonement. Someone else saw him lunching off oysters in a restaurant on the Mobile pier. He was seen on the front porch of the house with the red light in Baptist Bottom. But he was always found sitting on the front porch

by the time that Queenie returned from work, saying, “Hey, Queenie, what’s for supper? I’m starved to death!”

One evening Queenie came home to discover that Carl had a large bruise around his left eye. She didn’t ask how it had come about, uttered no word of sympathy, didn’t warn him against becoming involved in possibly more serious altercations. “I bet you wish I’d gotten my whole head knocked off, don’t you?” said Carl with his customary leer. “I bet that, on the whole, you wouldn’t mind the state of widowhood, would you?”

“I think I could bear up,” replied Queenie blandly.

“I bet you’ve got my coffin all picked out!”

Queenie reached into the pocket of her dress and drew out two coins.

“You see these quarters?” she asked.

“I see ’em.”

“They’re for you.”

“Give ’em here, then.” He reached out for the coins, but Queenie snatched them away.

“No. They’re special.”

“How special?”

“Ivey Sapp gave ’em to me when I was over at Mary-Love’s yesterday.”

“That fat nigger girl? Why was she giving you money?”

“She told me she got ’em special for me,” Queenie went on with a smile that was very rare to her since Carl had come back to town. “She told me to save these quarters for the ferryman.”

“What ferryman?”

“Ivey told me to always keep ’em with me. So when you’re laid out dead and cold, I’ve got these two silver quarters to close your eyes with. And that’s what you’ll have to buy your ticket to hell with.”

Carl’s grin faded. He reached out and swiped for the coins, but wasn’t quick enough and Queenie dropped them, with a little metallic clatter, back into her pocket.

Chapter 30

Danjo

In the eight years since the death of Genevieve Caskey, the widower James Caskey and his daughter Grace had remained in perpetual harmony in the house next door to Mary-Love. It was wondered in Perdido whether any father and any daughter, anywhere on the face of the earth, got along as well as did James and Grace. James would have done anything to make his little girl happy. Grace had declared, as a high school senior, that she would never, under any circumstances, be persuaded to leave her father's roof.

"No!" he cried. "You cain't stay here with me and rot, darling. You got to go to school!"

"I don't," returned Grace. "I know plenty. I'm gone be salutatorian this year, Daddy."

"Doesn't matter. You ought to go away to school. You ought to get out of Perdido for a while."

"I'm happy here. I'm *perfectly* happy, Daddy. I've got all my friends here." Grace ran with a pack of girls in her class and the class behind hers. They were all on terms of great intimacy, and they never had fights. "Besides, Daddy, who would take care of you?"

"About fifty million people would take care of me. Are you forgetting Mary-Love next door? Are you forgetting Elinor? Have you thought of Queenie? You think Queenie would let anything happen to me?"

"Queenie has her hands full with Carl," Grace pointed out. "And Elinor and Miss Mary-Love spend all their time raising little girls and fighting with each other."

"The point is," her father went on, "you ought to go to school. You ought to get out in the world, and meet the man who's gone make you happy."

"He doesn't exist!"

"He does. There's somebody for everybody, sweetheart! There's some man just waiting out there to fix you up with a perfect marriage."

"I don't believe it. I look around me, Daddy, what do I see? I see you and poor old Mama—"

"That was *my* mistake."

"—and I see Queenie and Carl. You think I'm gone start looking under bushel baskets for a husband?"

"What about Elinor and Oscar? They're happy."

"They're the exception, Daddy."

"Well, you could be an exception too, darling. I'm sure you would be. So I'm just not gone let you stay in Perdido, thinking you are doing me one bit of good. Darling, I love you to death, but let me tell you something—"

"What?"

"—I've had just about as much of your company as I can take!"

Grace laughed aloud at her father's patent lie.

"I want you out of this house!" His attempt at sternness was belied by seventeen years of singular indulgence.

"What if I say no?"

"I will have Roxie *sweep* you out. I will hook the screens behind you. If you don't go away to college, Grace, I'm not gone love you anymore."

Each was determined to make sacrifices for the other's benefit and comfort. Though Grace desperately longed to attend college, she told her father her sole desire was to remain with him in Perdido. Though James knew he would be desolate without her, he told his daughter he was weary of her company, and only wished she *would* go to Tennessee. For several weeks, father and daughter continued to argue until at last Grace gave in. She realized what pleasure would accrue to her father in being abandoned in the cause of her personal happiness. So Grace made plans, though convinced that without her, James would be lonely and miserable. She was to attend Vanderbilt in September.

And so, during the hottest part of August of 1929, Grace and James drove up through Alabama to Nashville, Tennessee, looked over the campus, were introduced to the president of the college, and chose the room Grace would inhabit. They went shopping for Grace's wardrobe, and purchased enough to clothe the entire co-ed freshman class. They went around to all the jewelry, gift, and antique shops, and James indulged himself in the purchase of any number of fragile, pretty, utterly useless items that would be jammed into bursting closets back home.

On their final evening together, James took his daughter to Nashville's best restaurant. He gave her an envelope stuffed with five-dollar bills, and said, "Darling, if you need anything, pick up the telephone and call me, you hear? Send a telegram. Whatever it is, I'll get it up here to you."

“When can I come home?”

“Anytime. I’ll borrow Bray and he’ll meet you in Atmore. You always keep enough money for a train ticket, you hear?”

“Daddy, I’m gone miss you so much!”

“You think I’m not gone miss you?”

“You said you weren’t.”

“I was lying. I don’t know what I’m gone do without you. You’re my baby. If I could I’d keep you with me, but that wouldn’t do either of us any good. When I was your age, I was living with Mama. Daddy had already died, I didn’t miss him at all. I loved Mama very much—but probably I shouldn’t have stayed. I should have gone out on my own. If I had gone out on my own, I would have met somebody nice and married them. But look what happened, I stayed with Mama, and then when Mama died I went crazy out of my mind and I married Genevieve Snyder.”

“Daddy, if you *hadn’t* married Genevieve, I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you.”

“You sure?”

“Of course. What do you think? I’m Mama’s girl. I’m not anybody else’s daughter.”

“Then I suppose it was all for the good,” sighed James Caskey. “Though it didn’t seem much like it at the time.”

“Daddy, you’ll be fine. Everybody in Perdido knows I’m up here at Vanderbilt, and everybody in town’s gone want to take care of you. Loneliness isn’t gone be *your* problem. Well, for instance, just look at the number of Caskeys there are now! You know, when I was little, I was all by myself, I didn’t have anybody to play with, I didn’t have anybody to talk to. But good Lord, look what it’s like now! Elinor came to town during the flood, and now there’s Miriam and Frances, and Queenie showed up, and Queenie’s got three children—”

“Don’t forget Carl!”

“Wish I could! Anyway, Daddy, the town is full of family now. They snuck up on us. You will hardly notice I’m gone.”

But a day or two following, while James Caskey was unwrapping the figurines and ornaments and plates he had purchased in Nashville, in his daughter’s company and with his daughter’s advice, it seemed as if each were a stone he was tossing down a deep, dry, black well that had opened itself wide at his feet.

. . .

Queenie Strickland worried that her children were too much exposed to their father's contaminating presence and conversation. She tried to keep them out of the house and removed from their father's baleful influence. She feared, however, that Malcolm was already lost. Carl had taken his elder son fishing on the upper Perdido, presented him with a gun on the first day of hunting season, had even allowed Malcolm to go with him to the race track in Cantonement one Saturday afternoon. Malcolm was easily won over to his father's camp by these masculine blandishments. One day, in anger that his mother had denied him a trifling privilege, Malcolm declared that he loved Carl very very much, and that he hated Queenie's guts.

Carl tended to ignore his daughter, believing a little girl beneath his notice. He thought if Queenie taught Lucille to sew and cook and flirt, she would turn out well enough.

With Malcolm all but lost, and Lucille in little danger, it was of greatest importance for Queenie to keep her younger son free of his father's influence. As she explained to James Caskey, "That boy is not like Malcolm, and he's certainly not like his daddy. He's so quiet and shy! He doesn't like the way his daddy talks. He doesn't like the way his daddy acts. I wish...I just *wish* he didn't have to live in the same house with Carl."

"Well," replied James, as he sat down in a chair on the other side of Queenie's desk in the outer office, "I don't know that it's so much worse for Danjo than it is for you and Lucille."

"It *is.* I'm used to it. I don't like it, but I'm used to it. Carl doesn't bother Lucille so much, 'cause she's a girl. He won't take Lucille out with him, see. He won't take her hunting, he won't take her with him to the track. That's the difference. And Carl keeps on talking about getting a gun for Danjo. A *gun*, James! And that child is only five years old!"

The telephone rang, and the conversation was broken off, not to be resumed that day. The next morning, James was at work early. As soon as Queenie arrived, and before she had even arranged her desk, James tapped on the glass and signaled for her to come into his office.

"Morning, James."

"Morning, Queenie. How'd you sleep?"

"Nightmares."

"Me too. I always have nightmares in an empty house."

“Oh, I know you miss your little girl! Have you heard from her?”

“I have. She has sent me three letters, and I get a postcard near about every day. I’ve got an album to put ’em in, went out and bought it last week.”

“So Grace is doing all right up at Vanderbilt?”

“She is making one friend after another. She says she is so happy up there she can hardly stand it. She says she wants me to write her some bad news so she can come down off cloud nine.”

“James, did you have something to say to me?” said Queenie, having noted from the first a distraction in her brother-in-law’s manner.

“I did. Sit down, Queenie. I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday.”

“About what?”

“About Danjo.”

Queenie nodded.

“Things didn’t get any better last night, did they?”

She stopped and considered the matter a moment. “I hate to say it, James, but I think I am getting sort of used to Carl’s being back. I mean, he doesn’t go out beating people up anymore. I don’t think he’s stealing. As long as he’s in one room at night and I’m in another that’s all right—or at least it would be if it weren’t for Danjo.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I was thinking maybe you should get rid of Danjo.”

“He’s my preciousest!”

“I know, but, Queenie, you don’t want him contaminated! That’s the word you used yesterday.”

“I sure don’t, but what am I supposed to do with him?”

“Give him to me.”

“To you? You don’t want him!”

“How you know that! I do want him!”

“He’s so little! What would you do with a five-year-old, James?”

“I’d raise him up right. I’ve had experience. I raised Grace, and as you know, most of that time I was working pretty much on my own. Genevieve was mostly with you in Nashville.”

“Well, I know all that. What I mean is, what about all your pretty things?”

“I don’t mind. Danjo is careful. He’s been in my house before. And if some things get broken, that’s all right. I can buy others. I’m not poor. I can build high shelves. Danjo will be just fine. So why don’t you go on and give him to me? Queenie, I’m so lonesome without Grace, I cain’t hardly stand it. I was moping around last night, just thinking that what I could use most in the world was a little boy to keep me company.”

“And you think Danjo will do?”

“Danjo would be the best, Queenie!”

“I’d hate to give him up.”

“Queenie, it’s not like I’d be taking him to a different town—you could come see him all the time. And look at it this way: I wouldn’t be taking him away from you, I’d just be taking him away from Carl.”

“I’d like that,” Queenie admitted. “Carl will raise holy hell.”

“What’s he gone do about it?”

“Come and take Danjo back, that’s what.”

“I’ll shoot him,” James promised complacently.

Queenie beat her heel rapidly on the floor. “Let me think about it, James.” She got up and returned to her own office. In five minutes she was back.

“Well?” asked James.

“I don’t want to give him up, I really don’t. But it just seems so selfish of me, when I’ve got three and you’ve just lost the only one you ever had.”

“That’s right, Queenie. It would be real selfish of you to keep Danjo all to yourself. So why don’t you go on and give him to me?”

“All right. *If* we can get him away from Carl.”

“I’ll speak to Carl.”

“You gone offer him money?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. How much you think he’d sell Danjo for? A hundred dollars a month?”

Queenie considered. “What about a new car?”

. . .

Queenie was right. In exchange for a new automobile—Carl’s choice and costing twelve hundred dollars—Danjo was given over to James Caskey for safekeeping. Ostensibly, the exchange was temporary, but no one was deceived. The boy was not consulted, but Danjo was so meek a child that he would doubtless have acquiesced to any proposition. Danjo was put in the old nursery in James’s house, which had been freshly wallpapered and

given a set of furniture. The boy was bewildered to think that he wouldn't have to share it with anyone. He cried a little when he left his mother, but he stopped his tears when she assured him that she would see him all the time. He had thought that he was being taken away from her forever, and even at that he had ventured no vehement protest.

The first weekend that Danjo spent in his new home, he would not venture out of his room, and when James would peep in, his nephew would always be sitting very still on the edge of his bed. The boy appeared so constrained and unhappy that James forewent his usual reluctance to intrude, and finally ventured into the room. Leaning against a chifforobe just inside the door, he peered down at Danjo and said, "Am I gone have to send you back to your mama and daddy, Danjo?"

Danjo looked up, his eyes full of tears.

"I want you to stay, Danjo, but you're just not happy here, I guess."

"I am!"

James Caskey was puzzled. "You don't want to go home to your mama and daddy?"

Danjo considered this. "I miss Mama..." he ventured.

"But not your daddy?"

Danjo shook his head vigorously.

"Then why aren't you happier here with me? Why don't you run around and play? You used to play all the time. Do you miss Lucille and Malcolm?"

Danjo shook his head cautiously. "I don't want to break anything," he said in a low voice.

"Break anything? Break what?"

"Break your stuff."

James stared at the boy. "You mean you're not leaving this room 'cause you're afraid you're gone knock something over?"

Danjo nodded, and appeared very near tears again.

"Lord, Lord," cried James Caskey. "Don't you worry about that, Danjo! *I* don't care if you break something. How much stuff you suppose my girl Grace broke while she was growing up? How much stuff you guess Roxie breaks while she's cleaning this house? You think I can walk through a room without something falling to the floor and smashing? I cain't! And I don't expect you can, either. Danjo, I want you to be happy here. You know how much I've got in this house. You breaking something's not gone make

one little bit of difference. I've got closets full of junk, and I'm gone be going out buying more anyway. Now, I don't want you to run out of here and start pitching things against the wall—"

Danjo's eyes widened in horror at the suggestion.

"—but I do want you to enjoy yourself here. I want you at your ease."

"You do?"

"I sure do. Danjo, do you know what I paid for you?"

"You bought Daddy a car?"

"I did. It cost me one thousand two hundred dollars. I've made a big investment in you, Danjo. And you got to help pay it back."

"How?"

"By having a good time. By letting me watch you enjoy yourself here. By keeping me company, and making me not feel so sorry for myself because my little girl's gone away. Will you do that?"

"I'll try!" cried Danjo, and he ran across the room and hugged his uncle.

Perdido claimed that it had never seen a family to match the Caskeys when it came to giving children up and taking children in, switching offspring around as if they had been extra turkey platters or other household items that there might be an excess of in one house and a lack of in the next. Carl Strickland made no secret of the terms of the deal by which James Caskey got custody of his Danjo. That was a sale that had all the force of a deeded exchange of land in the eyes of Perdido. Thenceforth, Danjo belonged to James Caskey, and Perdido thought it was wonderful of James that he allowed the boy's mother to visit her son whenever she liked.

It seemed a perfect situation. Carl Strickland had his new automobile. Queenie Strickland was assured of her boy's moral and financial future. James Caskey had a child to take the place of the one who had grown up and gone away. And no one was happier with the situation than Danjo himself.

Rather than taking it as an affront that he had been sold off for the price of a new automobile, Danjo was comforted by the binding aspects of that transaction. He was less likely to be snatched away and carried back across town to the house in which he was assaulted, in varying degrees and in varying ways, by his brother, his sister, and his father, and where his mother had been his sole but inadequate comfort. He loved James Caskey. He never got over a sense of privilege of having a room all to himself, of

living in a house that was quiet and filled with beautiful things, of being kissed and hugged rather than pinched and punched. The boy's only agony, and he kept it a deep secret, was the fear that someday his uncle would trade him off in turn, in exchange for a diamond ring, perhaps, or a little girl. Where would Danjo end up *then?*

Ten years before, the Caskeys had appeared a barren family to the rest of Perdido. There had been only James's little daughter Grace, a pale, whining thing hardly worth the attention her effeminate father paid her. Later Elinor and Queenie produced five children between them and divided them among the wanting Caskey households. It was as if Mary-Love and James had looked up and cried, *Good Lord, Elinor! For goodness' sake, Queenie! Y'all have got so many, and we don't have any, why don't y'all pass a couple of those children around so we can all enjoy them.* It wasn't quite like that, of course, not in the Caskey family, where a favor done was no more to be tolerated than a slap in the face—but the children were distributed nonetheless, so that each household had at least one. In consequence, the very texture of the entire family was altered, and despite individual animosities, the Caskeys seemed a younger, more vigorous and happier clan.

Chapter 31

Displacements

The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929, but no one in Perdido realized what effect that distant event—that strange crisis of faith and paper—would bring to bear upon each of them. The Caskeys, who perhaps might have had at least a crinkled brow or two of worry for what it would all mean to the family and to the town, were occupied at that time with a more immediate matter: the day the stock market crashed, Carl Strickland attempted to murder Queenie.

Unpremeditated assaults rarely occur in the morning. Violent passions are most often engendered by accumulated heat, by alcohol, by weariness of the body—elements whose effects are generally felt most strongly in the evening or late at night. But Queenie Strickland raised her husband's ire at the breakfast table by refusing to give him fifteen dollars to visit the track. His unpredictably savage reaction only showed Perdido how close to the edge the man had always been, even when he appeared to live quite peaceably in their midst.

"Queenie, you've got the money!" he shouted across the kitchen table.

"'Course I got it, but I'm gone spend it on food! How much you suppose I make?"

"I suppose you make plenty, that old man pays you plenty!"

"He doesn't! I make enough to feed this family, and that's all! Do you see me in new dresses? Where are Malcolm's new shoes? Is Lucille taking piano lessons? Do you hear a piano every afternoon when you come back from the track? If you need money so bad, why don't you go get yourself a job?"

"Give me the money, Queenie. You got it!"

"No," said Queenie. She got up from the table and motioned for Lucille and Malcolm to leave the room. They did so, making faces at their father's back. With relief, a moment later, Queenie heard the front door slam as the children went out.

"The money's mine," said Carl, getting up from the table and pushing it away from him so that all the dishes rattled, and a cup rolled off and smashed on the linoleum. "Everything you got is mine. Where is it?"

“Carl, get away from me!”

He pushed her against the sink. He grabbed handfuls of flesh around her thick waist and squeezed until she cried out in pain. She attempted to pull away. He pressed her harder. He momentarily let go, and with his right hand ripped the pocket from the front of her dress. Nothing fell out but the two coins kept in reserve for his dead eyes.

Seeing them, Carl retreated. Queenie gasped for breath, and stared at her husband. He seemed to her suddenly crazed, as if he had lost both reason and control in a single stroke. He turned wildly, lifted the table by a corner, and toppled it onto its side. All the dishes smashed, and Queenie’s legs were splattered and burned with hot coffee. She cried out and staggered toward the back door.

Carl ran up behind her, doubled up his fist and hit her as hard as he could in the kidney. Queenie’s breath forsook her, and she fell face down in the pile of broken crockery. As she rolled over in an attempt to rise, Carl kicked her three times in the belly—short, sharp, powerful kicks. Queenie stretched out in a long moan.

Carl placed his booted foot on her head, pressed down and ground Queenie’s face into the broken fragments of a white porcelain cup. The yellow linoleum grew bloody beneath Queenie’s prostrate body.

As the pressure of the boot was withdrawn, Queenie struggled to raise her head. One eye was masked with blood. Malcolm and Lucille stood horror-struck outside the kitchen door, peering through the screen. Lucille shrieked and ran away. Malcolm followed her a moment after.

Carl picked up a chair and smashed it across his wife’s back.

. . .

Lucille’s shrieks brought Florida Benquith to her kitchen window next door. Seeing the fleeing Malcolm, she went outside and hurried over to the Stricklands’ house. She peered in at the back door, and saw Carl Strickland, like an overfed demon, sitting on his wife’s rear end, and shredding open the back of her dress with a vegetable peeler held convulsively in both hands.

“Queenie! Queenie!” Florida screamed.

Blood welled up out of the long stripes in Queenie’s back, where the potato peeler had cut through the material and flayed open her skin.

Florida ran back to her house and, not taking the time to say a word to her astonished husband, took up his loaded shotgun from its place in the

corner of the dining room, and flung herself out the door once more. When she was still twenty feet from the house, and long before she could actually see through the Stricklands' back door, she fired the gun once, blowing a hole in the screen.

"Carl Strickland, I'm gone shoot you!" she hollered as she ran up to the door and into the house.

Startled by the blast of the shotgun, Carl rose from his wife's back, and fled through the house, out the front door, and across the front yard. Florida left Queenie in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor and followed him. As she got out onto the front porch, Carl was just flinging himself into his automobile. Florida fired again, and knocked out a side window of the car. Carl got the engine started and he barreled off.

Florida Benquith dropped the shotgun on the grass and looked all around her, astonished. Miz Daughtry across the street stood on her front steps in her nightdress. The Moye children perched open-mouthed at the end of their sidewalk.

"Call Elinor Caskey!" Florida shouted at Miz Daughtry, and ran back inside. Dr. Benquith was already there, and said only, "She's still alive..."

. . .

No one had any idea where Carl Strickland had gone. Oscar went to the sheriff and remarked coldly, "If Carl does come back, Mr. Key, and you happen to see him, let us know, will you, so that we can get Queenie out of his way. This next time, Queenie might not be so lucky."

Embarrassed, Charley Key asked, "How is Miz Strickland, Oscar?"

"Three broken ribs, dislocated jaw. Lost most of the vision in her right eye. Other than that, just cut up and bruised."

"Well," said the sheriff, "I'm sorry to hear it. I notified the state police. Over in Florida, too. Told 'em Mr. Strickland hung out a lot down at Cantonement. They're looking for him there."

"I don't care where he is, as long as he's not in Perdido."

"I'm gone make sure he don't hurt nobody else," Charley said staunchly.

"You could have stopped *this* from happening," Oscar pointed out, and walked out of the office.

Queenie spent ten days at Sacred Heart Hospital in Pensacola. During that time, Malcolm and Lucille stayed with Elinor, and were given the guest bedroom at the front of the house—a room so little used that it hadn't even

been given a name, though later it would be called, “the children’s room.” Elinor and Oscar had anticipated some difficulty with Malcolm and Lucille, who were not known as model children, but the brother and sister appeared subdued and genuinely concerned for their mother’s well-being. Every day Bray drove either Elinor or Mary-Love or James down to visit Queenie, and every day one or another of her children would go along. Queenie’s attitude during her recuperation was one almost of relief: “If this is what I had to go through to get rid of Carl for once and all, then I am happy to have done it. I’m just gone have to hope he doesn’t try to come back for more.”

. . .

Queenie was brought back to Perdido on the eighth of November, and installed in Elinor’s house. Until Carl was found, it was not thought safe for her to stay in her own home. He had caught her there by surprise twice before, and might possibly do so again. While she recuperated at Elinor’s, Queenie was given Frances’s room, because it had its own bath.

When she returned home from school that day, Frances ran into the house, up the stairs, and into her own bedroom. She wanted to hug Queenie, but Queenie cried, “Lord, no, child! You cain’t touch me, look at my face! You ought to see my arms and back under these bedclothes! I am a sight for men and angels. You squeeze my hand, though,” she said, holding out her fingers for the timid child to grasp.

“Queenie, I’m real glad you’re back from the hospital,” said Frances.

“No, you’re not,” said Queenie.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Elinor, peering into the room through the window that opened onto the porch.

“Hey, Mama,” said Frances. “I *am* glad she’s back.”

“No, you’re not,” said Queenie, “’cause I took over your room.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Frances. “’Cause you’re sick, and I’m not.”

“I’m not sick, I’m just so sore all over I cain’t hardly move without wanting to sit down and write out my will, that’s all.”

Frances left Queenie alone and joined her mother on the porch. “Mama,” she asked, “if Queenie’s in here, then where am I gone sleep?”

“I’m putting you in the front room, darling,” replied Elinor.

Frances was dumbstruck. Her fear of the front room and the undersized closet door to the right of the hearth was as strong as ever. She still would not remain in the house alone, even during brightest day; she still listened every night from her bed for the sound of that closet door in

the next room being surreptitiously opened, and of whatever was inside emerging cautiously into the dark.

Crushed by the terror that her mother's simple revelation inspired in her, Frances was unable to speak another word. She wandered off in a daze. In her worst fears, Frances had never imagined that she would ever actually have to spend a *night* in that front room. The thought was too horrible to imagine—that she would be forced to lie in that bed alone, at night, and stare straight across at the weird little door, waiting for whatever was inside slowly to turn the knob and squeeze out. It would not matter that Queenie would be in the next room, through the passage where the linens were stored; that Lucille and Malcolm and her parents were across the hall, that Zaddie was downstairs. The entire town of Perdido might squeeze into the house and arrange themselves along the walls, but it would make no difference if Frances had to sleep alone in the front room. She thought she would surely die.

Now she found herself standing before the door of that very room, not having realized where her distracted footsteps were taking her. She softly turned the knob and peered in. As always, the room was dim and cool. No air moved in it. It smelled old—older than a room in any house in Perdido could possibly be. To Frances it smelled as if whole generations of Caskeys had died there in that room—as if decade after decade, Caskey mothers had been delivered of stillborn infants in that bed; as if an uninterrupted line of Caskey husbands had murdered their adulterous wives and stuck them in that chifforobe; as if a hundred skeletons with rotting flesh and tatters of clothing were heaped in that little closet, jostled in among the fur and feathers. For the first time in her memory, Frances noticed that the clock on the mantel had been wound and was ticking. She was about to shut the door when the clock chiming the quarter-hour seemed to beckon her. Frances resisted its call, anxiously pulled the door shut, and fled down the hall, not daring to look behind her. She ran back onto the porch and buried her head in her mother's lap.

"Darling, what's wrong?" said Elinor.

"I don't want to sleep in the front room!" cried Frances.

"Why not?"

"I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

Frances paused, and wondered how to frame her reply. “I’m scared of that closet.”

“That closet?” Elinor laughed. “There’s nothing in that closet. Just my clothes and my shoes and my hats. You’ve seen inside that closet.”

“Let me sleep in the room Lucille and Malcolm are in. They can sleep in the front room.”

“They’ve already settled in, and they’re doing fine where they are. I’m not going to move them.”

“Then let Queenie sleep in there! Let me have my own room back, Mama!”

“Queenie needs to have a bathroom of her own. And I want her to be near me, darling, so I can hear her if she calls.”

“Let me go over to James’s, then.”

“James has his hands full with Danjo.” Elinor’s voice wasn’t as soft now as when Frances had made her first plea. “Do you have any other suggestions?”

“I’ll even go stay with Grandmama.”

“Miss Mary-Love would never let me hear the end of it, if I sent you over there when I have got an empty bed in this house. I don’t want to hear another word. You’re going to sleep in the front room until Queenie is well enough to go home and until we’re sure that Carl is not going to bother her anymore. Do you understand?”

“Elinor!” Queenie called through the window.

Elinor stepped over to the window and peered in. “Queenie, can I do something for you?”

“You sure can. I couldn’t help hearing all of that and I want you to put me in the front room, and let Frances have her room back.”

“Queenie, I hope you weren’t taking Frances’s nonsense seriously.”

“She doesn’t want me in her bed, and I can understand that. She wants her own little room back. If this were my room, I wouldn’t want to give it up either.”

“Queenie, I’m not letting you move. Now you listen, you need your own bathroom, and I want you where I can sit out here on the porch and talk to you through the window. That’s why you are where you are, and there is no reason on this earth why Frances can’t sleep in the front room. It is only six feet away. The front room is not at the end of the earth.”

Frances listened to this conversation with trembling.

“Frances,” said her mother sternly, “come with me.”

Frances followed her mother down the hall into the front room. Elinor unhesitatingly went over to the closet and pulled open the door. “Now do you see that there is nothing inside this closet? I have got so much stuff in there that there is not *room* for anything to be hiding in there.”

The child made no reply, but only hung her head.

“Frances, have you been talking to Ivey Sapp? Has Ivey been telling you stories about things that are supposed to eat up little girls?”

“No, ma’am!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, if Ivey does start to try to fill your head with nonsense like that, I don’t want you to listen to her. Ivey doesn’t always know what she’s talking about. Ivey gets things wrong.”

“Then there *are* things that eat you?”

“Not in this closet,” replied her mother with a disquieting evasiveness.

“Where are they then?”

“Nothing’s going to eat *you,* darling,” said Elinor as she closed the closet door and seated herself on the edge of the bed. “Come here, Frances.” Frances went over timidly to her mother and Elinor lifted her up beside her.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Now, we go out together sometimes on the river in Bray’s little boat, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you afraid then?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Why not? Other little girls would be afraid. Lucille Strickland won’t go out in a boat on the Perdido.”

“It’s ’cause you’re there, Mama, that’s why I’m not afraid.”

Elinor hugged Frances close, and said, “That’s right, you’re my little girl, and nothing’s ever going to happen to you. Besides, *you* of all people never have to be afraid of that river. So why are you afraid to stay in this room, when you know I’m right across the hall?”

“I don’t know,” said Frances, troubled. “’Cause it might get me before you could come in and save me.”

“What is ‘it’?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then how do you know it’s there?”

“I can feel it, Mama!”

Elinor pried her daughter’s arms from around her waist, pushed her aside, and looked directly in her face. “Now, listen to me, Frances,” she said in a patient but determined voice, “there is nothing in this room to hurt you, you understand? If you see anything, it’s only your imagination. It’s shadows, it’s dust catching the light. If you hear anything, it’s only your imagination. It’s the house settling on its foundations, or it’s the furniture creaking. If you feel anything touching you, it’s your nerves going to sleep or it’s a mosquito landing on your arm. That’s all it is. You’re dreaming. You’re dreaming that you hear something, you’re dreaming that you see something, you’re dreaming that something is trying to pull you out of bed. Do you understand? Nothing will happen to you in this room because I won’t let it.”

Her mother showed her that some of her clothes had already been brought in and hung up in the chifforobe. Elinor pulled out drawers and made her daughter admit how sweet the sachet inside smelled. She opened the curtains and showed Frances that the view of the levee and Miss Mary-Love’s house was very nearly the same from here as from her own room. At the last, Elinor turned the key in the lock of the door of the small closet, and said, “Look, Frances, I’m locking the door. So you don’t have to worry. If there’s anything inside there, it won’t be able to get out now. You’ll be perfectly safe. And just remember, if you hear anything or see anything or feel anything, don’t pay any attention. It’s just your imagination. You’re *my* little girl, and nothing can happen to you.”

Chapter 32

Locked or Unlocked

That first night of Queenie's return to Perdido, Frances played out her entire repertoire of procrastination tricks, but ingenious as she was, at last she was roused out of her father's lap on the porch and told that she must absolutely go to bed.

"Why are you being like this?" her father asked.

"She's afraid to go to bed," Elinor explained.

"You have slept by yourself since you were a *little* girl," cried Oscar in surprise.

"She's not afraid of being by herself," Elinor continued, "she's afraid of the front room."

"What's in the front room?" Oscar asked. "I can hardly remember the last time I was even in there. I remember looking at the new curtains, but that was years and years ago! Elinor, have you taken in a boarder that I don't know anything about?"

But Frances didn't laugh and clung to her father more tightly still.

"Elinor," said Oscar, seeing that his daughter really was frightened, "cain't we let her sleep with us?"

"No," said Elinor. "Then she'd want to sleep with us forever."

"I wouldn't!" protested Frances. "Just tonight!"

"Then tomorrow night, then the night after that."

"Your mama," said Oscar, "wants you in the front room, so I guess I'm just gone have to carry you up there."

Oscar did so, and laid her in the bed beneath the covers. He waggled the curtains to show her that no one was hiding behind them, ostentatiously knelt down on the floor and peered under the bed, opened the door of the passage that led to Frances's own room where Queenie was already asleep, and rattled the knob of the closet to show that it remained locked. He kissed Frances good-night and left the room. Snaking his hand back through the door, he pushed the button that turned out the overhead light.

After her father had shut the door, Frances could no longer assure herself that the front room was connected with the rest of the house. She was cut off from her parents' protection; they would never hear her if she

called. The front room was real enough but those doors no longer communicated with the house in which Elinor and Oscar Caskey lived. Those windows no longer looked out on the same familiar scene. Frances trembled now to think what unimaginable space might lie behind those doors, what unexpected somber landscape might be imperfectly discerned through those windows. She lay rigidly in the bed, staring into the unsettling blackness, listening in a terrified stupor for something to begin shifting about inside the closet. Gradually her eyes became accustomed to the dark, and she faintly made out the room's objects as inky shadows against more blackness. The cast-iron chandelier above the foot of her bed was her point of reference. She stared at it with concentration. It seemed to sway but there was no air moving in the room. Frances balled herself up and burrowed beneath the covers. Her stifled breath was hot and wet under the starched sheets.

Occasionally she heard creaks. Once she was startled by what sounded to her like a marble dropping to the floor and rolling a short distance.

Eventually she fell asleep. She must have, for Zaddie awakened her in the morning, pulling back the curtains on a dim overcast day. Frances felt the relief a man feels when he has narrowly escaped a terrible death, as when a pursuing animal is momentarily distracted and turns aside, forgetting his quarry.

"Y'all having breakfast out on the porch this morning, Frances," said Zaddie, kneeling at the side of the bed, and slipping on the child's socks for her.

"Zaddie, I'm hungry! Can I have three pieces of toast today?"

"You sure can! I tell you what, if you'll finish up your dressing, I'll go downstairs right this minute and put that bread in the oven."

"I can dress myself," said Frances. "You don't have to help me."

"I like to! You're my little girl!"

Frances hugged Zaddie. "Zaddie," she whispered, "I'm so glad you didn't go away to that college for colored people."

"Well, if I'd done that, who'd take care of my little girl? Sure not nobody in town loves you like I love you!" Zaddie laughed, and left Frances alone once again.

Frances made a little show of her morning bravery, witnessed only by herself. With no apparent hesitation she pulled open the door of the chifforobe and placed her folded nightclothes in the darkest corner of the

bottom shelf. She went alone into the connecting passage, actually shutting herself in, and took her time in selecting a fresh towel. Returning to the room, she dropped a pin so that she could lean down and peer, as if inadvertently, under the bed. Perhaps, after all, the danger in the room had been no more than her imagination. Perhaps, after all, there was nothing to fear. Zaddie called her from the hallway. "Frances, toast's ready!"

Frances grinned to herself and looked around the room. As she was about to leave, glowing in her confidence, she decided to try to rid herself of her last piece of fear. She'd rattle the knob of the locked closet door.

"Coming!" she called to Zaddie, and thinking only of the food she was about to eat, she ran across the room and turned the knob of the closet door, waiting for that comforting rattle that would show her that whatever was inside—and there wasn't anything anyway—still couldn't get out at her.

But the knob did not rattle. Instead it turned smoothly in her grasp, and the door swung open to reveal the vista of crowded fur and feathers, showing Frances that the danger all night long had been inestimably greater than she had imagined.

Somehow, during the night, the closet door had been unlocked.

Frances ran to her mother, and told Elinor—with all the firmness that she could muster—that she was never going to sleep in the front room again.

"Hush!" said Elinor. "Are you still going on about that room?"

Frances nodded dolefully.

"Did anything happen last night?"

"No," replied Frances in a hot whisper, kneeling on the swing and burying her face against her mother's neck. "But this morning when I got up the closet door was unlocked."

Elinor made no response to this.

Defensively, Frances cried: "You locked it yesterday afternoon, Mama! I saw you! Daddy jiggled the knob last night and it was still locked! And when I got up this morning, it was *un*locked! Please let me sleep with you and Daddy tonight."

Elinor took her daughter to the front room, pulled on the handle of the closet door, and demonstrated that it was indeed still locked.

"Who locked it?" cried Frances, staring at the door in another agony of terror.

“No one!” cried Elinor. “It was never unlocked. You dreamed it, darling.”

“I didn’t!”

“You are worrying Oscar and me to death with this business, Frances. I don’t want to hear it mentioned again. I want you to get it through your head that you are going to stay in this room until Queenie is well enough to go home, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Frances despairingly.

That night, Frances was summarily put between the covers, hastily kissed, and promptly abandoned to the darkness of the room and the infidel closet.

. . .

For the several weeks of Queenie’s convalescence, Frances nightly went through her agony in the front room. One night her terror would perhaps be a bit less, and she would think, *I’m getting used to it. Nothing’s ever happened.* The next night, however, her fear would be greater, and she would think, *It’s just waiting until I’m completely off my guard.* Elinor did not repeat the experiment of trying the lock, but would merely say, “It’s nonsense, Frances, complete nonsense. You know there’s nothing in that closet anyway except my clothes and hats and shoes.” During the day the door was always locked. It was only at night that the closet began to play its tricks. Then the door was sometimes locked, sometimes not. Every night, after Frances had lain in bed for a time without even thinking of trying to fall asleep, she would quietly rise and walk over and try the knob. No matter which way she anticipated, *locked* or *unlocked*, she was always wrong. As time passed, she began to make a game of it, and would stand before the door and make a prediction as to whether the knob were locked or unlocked—whether it would turn cleanly, or jar in her hand. She always chose wrong.

She became accustomed even to this maddening pattern, and her bravery in attempting the door always seemed in her mind to defuse the real danger of the closet. After thus proving herself, she was allowed to sleep undisturbed for the remainder of the night.

One night, however, she awakened suddenly, borne up out of sleep with the presentiment that something was very wrong. The room was very dark, and the house was quiet and still. She somehow knew that everyone in the house was asleep but her. Without thinking, she rose in the bed, kicked

the pillows aside, and pulled open the drapes over the front window. The room became less dark. Frances now could see the black outline of the closet door. She could see the brass knob, gleaming a faint gold. She had locked the closet door herself. She was certain no one had come into the room to undo that brave piece of work. If she tried the knob now, however, would the door be locked?

She would pull on the knob. If the door remained locked, then she'd be safe and could go back to sleep; if it were unlocked, then whatever was inside would jump out and kill her.

Frances prayed her usual ineffectual prayer and started to climb down from the bed.

A rectangle of light, white-blue and cold, suddenly gleamed around the closet door. It was bright enough to show the colors of the carpet fringe. The left-hand side of the rectangle of light began to grow wider; the other three sides remained the same narrow strips. After a moment of observing this merely as a phenomenon of geometrical progression, Frances realized that it was the result of the door of the closet slowly opening.

. . .

The hallway down the center of the second floor of the Caskey home was wide, with a long runner of dark blue carpet over the parquet floors. At one end was the door with stained glass leading to the narrow unscreened porch at the front of the house. At the other end was the landing and a great window, half-way between the first and second floors, looking out over the back yard and the levee. Frances fled down this corridor, desperate to cry out. The doors of all the other bedrooms were shut. She could scarcely believe that her parents were actually behind one of them, Queenie behind another, Lucille and Malcolm sleeping peacefully behind the third. She took hold of the banister knob at the top of the stairs and turned and looked back down the hallway. A whiteness, not like sunlight or lamplight or moonlight, now formed a rectangle—very like the first one around the closet door—around the front room door that she had pulled shut behind her. To be as bright as it was, the room must have been filled with the unnatural bluish-white illumination. Frances was certain that the closet door was opened full. Whatever had been inside the closet now completely possessed the front room. Perhaps it was looking under the bed for her, just as she had always checked under the bed for it. As Frances stared, transfixed, waiting for that door to open as the other one had only moments before, the refulgence

began to seep out into the hallway like mist. By its light she could now make out the pattern of the wallpaper; she could see the lines in the parquet along the walls.

Frances dared not disturb her parents. She felt certain that the minute they stepped into the hallway the glow would somehow dissipate and she would be returned to the front room, chastised for her cries and her fear. She decided, therefore, to go downstairs to Zaddie, who slept in a small room off the kitchen. Zaddie would give her a blanket, and Frances would roll up in it on the floor and be perfectly content. The light from the closet could do as it pleased.

It did not occur to Frances that whatever was in the front room might mean danger to anyone but herself. Whatever was in the closet, whatever caused the door to lock and unlock, whatever produced this misty light and now wandered about the front room, was interested in Frances alone.

She ran down the stairs and paused on the landing. Behind the great window the night was still black. The water oaks were only massive amorphous shadows. She couldn't see the levee. She turned once more to look back. The front room door had been thrown wide open, and the light poured out into the corridor, bleaching the colors there. The panes of colored glass in the porch door reflected the light in sickly hues.

Frances closed her eyes and convulsively grasped the bannister, momentarily frozen to the spot, when with the sound of a great explosion, the staircase window behind her shattered. Thousands of shards of glass and splinters of wood showered down upon her, and Frances no longer held back her screams.

Chapter 33

The Croker Sack

Elinor and Oscar were wakened immediately by the noise of the explosion and the screams of both Frances and Queenie. As Elinor rose in her bed, there was the sound of a gunshot, and the window of their bedroom shattered and a picture on the opposite wall crashed to the floor. The house seemed to be under fire from the direction of the levee.

"For God's sake Elinor, get down!" cried Oscar.

Elinor paid no attention. She leaped from the bed and ran out of the room, calling "Frances! Frances!"

There were more shots. Elinor heard windows breaking on the first floor. There were dull thumps as the bullets struck the side of the house. A window seemed to break somewhere inside the house, and Elinor heard Zaddie's scream.

Queenie stood in the doorway of her room, holding herself up weakly by the doorjamb. She had her thumb on the switch to turn on the hall light.

"No!" cried Elinor. "Don't! They'll be able to see inside the house!"

"It must be Carl!" cried Queenie wildly.

A shot, aimed through the broken staircase window, whizzed down the corridor and smashed three panes of stained glass in the door at the opposite end.

"Mama?" said Malcolm tentatively. He and Lucille stood in the open doorway of the children's room, staring at the broken glass at their feet.

"Go back inside your room," said Elinor quickly. "Sit down on the floor and don't move."

The children hesitated.

"Now!"

Lucille and Malcolm retreated inside and slammed the door after them.

"Queenie, go back in and sit down in that chair in the corner. Don't get up no matter what."

"It's Carl," cried Queenie in desperation, "trying to kill us all!"

The shots, which had briefly stopped, resumed. Elinor stood upright against the doorway of her room. With resounding thumps, two bullets embedded themselves in the ceiling of the hallway.

“Frances!” she called.

“Mama?” The terrified voice came weakly from below.

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the stairs! I’m cut! The glass cut me!”

“Frances, don’t turn on any lights. And don’t try to come back upstairs.”

“Miss El’nor!”

“Zaddie?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Zaddie called up.

“Zaddie, don’t turn on any lights. Can you see Frances?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Zaddie, come get me,” whispered Frances.

“Walk up the stairs and get her,” said Elinor, “then carry her down to the front hallway. Don’t go near any windows.”

“You want me to call the police, Miss El’nor?”

“No,” replied Elinor, “Oscar’s calling them now.”

Oscar reached out from behind and put his hand on Elinor’s shoulder. “I cain’t get Mr. Key on the line. Are we sure it’s Carl?”

“Who else is going to be firing bullets into the house, Oscar?”

“Nobody else, I guess. Is everybody standing away from the windows, Elinor?” He whispered, as if by his voice, at such a distance, Carl Strickland would find them out.

“Lucille and Malcolm are in the children’s room. They’re safe—at least for now—because that’s at the front of the house. Queenie’s sitting in the corner chair in Frances’s room. Some of the shots went through the screens, and that inside window is broken, but if Queenie sits still, she’ll be all right.”

“Where’s Frances?”

“Downstairs with Zaddie. I told them to sit in the hallway. Frances got cut when the staircase window broke.”

“Is she cut bad?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let me go call Dr. Benquith.”

Oscar went back into the sitting room, which had no window open to the back of the house and the madman firing there, and telephoned Leo Benquith. He returned to the door, saying, “He’s coming right over, but I told him to be careful, he should—”

Elinor was no longer there.

He called for her frantically.

“Hush!” she cried from the landing.

She was on her knees, inching her way across the glass-littered floor. Once past the danger of the exposed staircase window, Elinor got to her feet and descended the stairs. Broken glass crackled beneath her feet. “I’m going to see to Frances, Oscar! You stay up there. Make sure Queenie and the children stay where they are!”

“Elinor, you shouldn’t have left me!”

“Mama!” cried Frances. Regardless of the splinters and shards of glass, Elinor seated herself on the bottom step. She held out her arms to her daughter, and the child leaped into them.

“Frances, did anything get in your eyes? Can you see me?”

They heard more shots and the splintering of wood. “He’s aiming for the lattice,” said Zaddie quietly.

“Mama, I’m bleeding!”

“Yes, but can you still see all right? Out of both eyes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right, then,” said Elinor, pushing her away with a kiss. “You hold on to Zaddie now, you hear? Don’t let go of Zaddie. And Zaddie, you stay down low. Whoever it is is still on the levee, but he’s broken every window in the back of the house and he may start to come around to one side or the other. If he does that, I want you and Frances to crawl into the pantry and shut the door, you hear?”

There was another shot, but this time from inside the house.

“Mama!”

“Shhh! That’s your daddy, shooting out the window back at Carl. Trouble is, I don’t think Daddy could hit anybody if he were standing right in front of him, holding up the barrel.”

Elinor stood and moved quickly to the front door. As she put her hand on the knob Frances called out in an agony, “Mama, where are you going?”

“Shhh!” said Zaddie, grabbing Frances around the waist to prevent her from going after her mother. “Miss El’nor, you gone take care of things?”

“Zaddie,” said Elinor, as she eased herself out the door, “I’m going to try.”

The door closed behind Elinor, and Zaddie and Frances were left hugging each other in the midst of debris, darkness, confusion, and fear.

. . .

Carl Strickland sat comfortably on the path atop the levee behind Oscar Caskey's house. He had two rifles, a double-barreled shotgun, a crate of .22 ammunition, and a box of shotgun shells. He had been startled by a bluish-white light suffusing the upstairs hallways of the Caskey house, but by that same light he had been able to smash the large staircase window in the back. That light had immediately winked out, and it was a disappointment to Carl that no other had come on. The screams he had heard had satisfied him that he had at least frightened the household, even if he had not been so lucky as to kill anyone. Carl had been expecting the sheriff to drive up, but no one had come. He had not anticipated being so much at his leisure in this matter, and had begun wondering, since the inhabitants of the house appeared so passive in their defense, whether he ought not move down and around to the side of the house and fire into the windows there. He knew from his wife's distinctive scream which room Queenie was in. For good measure he had fired another shot through the second-floor screened porch and grinned when he heard more glass break in the interior. *That* was Queenie's room. He imagined the bullet burying itself in the folds of his wife's ample flesh.

He had seen the burst of fire from another window of the second floor, but the bullet came nowhere near him. *That* must be Oscar Caskey, Carl thought, and returned the fire with far greater accuracy.

If they're armed too, Carl considered, then maybe it was time to get out of here. He'd have other opportunities.

He fired two more shots at the house, emptying the loaded guns. Then shoving the weapons into a croker sack with the ammunition, he stood up, brushed himself off, and scuttled down the river side of the levee, using the heavy sack as a drag and a balance.

He heard a car in the distance. *That* is the police, he said to himself, and he heaved the sack into the boat in which he had crossed from the opposite bank. He pushed the boat farther into the water until it floated free, then climbed in himself, taking care to keep the craft steady.

Just as he was lifting the paddles, he was startled by a subdued splash upstream, but that might have been anything at all. He peered up into the darkness, but saw nothing. He paddled swiftly across the river, but all his energy couldn't prevent the current from propelling the boat at a sharp downstream angle. The northern shore of the Perdido, which was not

banked by a levee, was soft and marshy. Beyond was a vast grove of ancient live oaks, and hidden among these was the automobile he had received from James Caskey in exchange for his younger son.

There was no moon, and the sky was overcast. The Perdido ran silently, smoothly, quickly, and relentlessly in the direction of the whirlpool at the junction a few hundred yards downstream.

Carefully, Carl climbed out of the boat. His foot sank deep into the soft mud of the riverbank, closing over the top of his left shoe. He drew it up with an expression of disgust, and advanced to firmer ground, dragging the boat behind him. The live oaks in this grove were some of the largest trees in all of Alabama, and very likely the oldest. In an area of three or four acres several score of the trees, which retained their leathery leaves all winter, stood as black domes, their lower branches so massive that their extremities dragged the ground. Every tree thus formed a closed canopy, and underneath these living umbrellas festooned with Spanish moss, no grass would grow, no animals took shelter, and even a moonlit night was black. Children who had no fear or scruples about riding their bicycles over Indian burial mounds refused to play here. The trees and the grove were majestic, but unpleasantly so, as if they had been conceived as a monument to someone who had been here long before the Indians, the Spanish, the French, the English, and the Americans, all of whom had laid claim, in succession, to the grove.

Carl intended to hide the boat beneath one of these great canopies, for he could be reasonably confident that it would not be disturbed. He wasn't yet finished with the Caskeys or his wife.

He took out the croker sack and laid it carefully on the ground in a sort of clearing between two of the trees close to the bank of the river. Then he dragged the boat to the nearest of the live oaks, backed through the drooping curtain of branches and into the interior of the shrouded space. He could see nothing. He cried out softly when a strand of moss suddenly draped itself across his face. He unceremoniously dropped the boat near the vast trunk of the live oak and then, with groping arms outstretched before him, carefully retraced his steps. The wind sighed through the branches, and again a piece of moss fell across his face, as a net might be thrown over a creeping animal. When he reached up to brush it away, his fingers became entangled, and he tore the moss impatiently from its branch.

His exploring hands struck against a drooping branch that he had not seen. Once he emerged from the umbrella, the black night would seem light in comparison to this impenetrability.

He was pushing carefully ahead, hoping not to strike his head or become entangled in the smaller branches, when his step was arrested by a clatter outside the perimeter of the tree. He instantly knew it for the sound of his guns being tossed together. The sound of splitting wood, and another, more prolonged clatter told him that his crate of ammunition had been split open, its contents scattered.

“Hey!” he called, but his voice was neither as loud nor as belligerent as he had intended. He pressed quickly through the curtain of branches, and again stood beneath the open sky.

In the clearing where he had left the croker sack stood a woman, dressed in a white nightdress that gleamed from the river water with which it was soaked. Her back was to Carl as she picked up one of the rifles and effortlessly tossed it into the river. Carl ran forward. The woman, without hurrying, picked up the other two guns and flung them into the water as well. She turned then and faced Carl.

It was Elinor Caskey.

“Queenie said it was you firing from the levee.”

He rushed at her, with one hand raised to strike her. With an inconsequential motion of her own arm, she batted him away.

The force of the casual blow knocked him to the ground.

He stared up at her incredulously. He could scarcely make out the features of her face in the darkness, but the clinging nightdress continued to gleam.

“My guns...” Carl began hesitantly.

“I needed the croker sack,” Elinor said.

He got quickly to his feet. He circled around her, unsure. Had she really hit him hard enough to knock him to the earth, or had he only lost his balance and fallen? He was behind her. “What for?” he asked.

In her fleeting profile as she turned, he caught a small smile.

“Oh,” Elinor returned, “for you, Carl.”

He punched her in the belly with all his strength. But it wasn’t flesh there, it was something more giving and resilient. Elinor seemed to stand even straighter after the blow; she raised one arm. Something—not a hand—was clamped on Carl’s shoulder.

With one sudden, sure application of pressure Carl was driven to the earth. Because it was applied to only one shoulder, one side of Carl's body was instantly compressed. The clavicle gave way first, and then the ribs were jammed together and cracked. His lung was pierced with bone fragments and an artery was severed. The thigh bone was jammed up through the pelvis, the kneecap shattered against the ground. The shin and foot were crushed beneath the force.

Carl cried out, but the cry was strangled as his lung filled with blood.

One side of him remained whole but the other was squeezed into a third of its former space.

With a similar motion, Elinor brought the appendage that was not a hand down on Carl's other shoulder. She pressed it swiftly toward the earth.

Carl's face gaped up at her. His whole body was mangled, nearly all the bones dislocated, ligaments torn, organs displaced. The backbone remained intact, but it served only to curve him into the shape of a ball. He was half as tall as before. Instinctively he attempted to straighten himself, to stand up, but his body of course could not obey. Only his neck stretched upward a bit and his battered chin lifted into the night air.

Suddenly, Elinor dropped down before him, but the motion was not that of a woman squatting, or falling to her knees. It was the movement of some other sort of creature entirely. Carl heard Elinor's dress tear in a dozen places, as if it no longer fit the body that it encased. Her face was only a foot from his, and in the darkness he could see that her countenance had become wide and flat and round; the eyes bulged, and were huge; her mouth was monstrous, lipless, and it hissed wetly in a grin that had nothing human about it.

Her arms were once more lifted on either side of him. He gasped and winced against the blow that he was certain would kill him. But the blow did not come, only darkness, and the overpowering odor of burlap.

She was drawing the croker sack over his body.

Carl prayed for death, but death did not come. Neither did unconsciousness. Though his body below the neck seemed a continuing explosion of pain, his head maintained an unmerciful clarity through it all.

The pain, he considered, could not be worse, not in a thousand deaths, not in a thousand years of hell.

But Carl was wrong; the pain did become worse, for he was suddenly jerked up into the air inside the croker sack, and carried along upside down.

The sack didn't drag the earth, or strike against Elinor's knees, so she must have been carrying him in one hand, and at arm's length. But what woman —what *man*—was as strong as that? Carl's brain filled with blood. His broken limbs dropped down around his head inside the croker sack until he was stifled with them. The fragments of his left arm were smothering him. Carl Strickland had been a big man, and now he was being carried along in a sack that wouldn't have properly held his daughter.

The confusion of broken limbs that pressed against his face didn't smother him quickly enough, for his consciousness lasted long enough for him to realize that he was being carefully carried into the river. Elinor waded slowly into the water. At the top of his head, he perceived the river water permeating the burlap. Then more strongly, pressing the fabric against his ear, he felt the current of the river. Its ever stronger odor invaded the close confines of the sack, and he tasted the mud of the Perdido as water began to fill the bag and pour into his mouth.

It wasn't the torn arteries, the punctured lungs, the ruptured organs, or the shattered bones that killed Queenie's husband. Carl Strickland drowned in Perdido water.

Chapter 34

The Caskey Conscience

On the night that Carl Strickland fired wantonly into Oscar Caskey's house, the sheriff of Perdido was having a drink with friends across the state line in Florida. By the time that Charley Key returned to Perdido and heard about Carl Strickland's rampage, the Caskeys were surveying the damage. Key entered the house, gave a low whistle, looked at Oscar and said, "Mr. Strickland did this? You positive?"

"Yes," replied Oscar grimly.

"Is he still out there?"

"No, he's gone."

"How you know that for sure?"

Zaddie was on the stairs, sweeping glass and splinters down, step by step. Elinor came out of the kitchen, holding her bandaged daughter in her arms. Frances, pale and distracted, clung tightly to her mother's neck.

"I know it for sure," said Oscar, "because Elinor went out the front and sneaked around to the levee."

"I saw him take his guns and climb over the levee, and get in a boat," Elinor added with no particular friendliness toward the sheriff. "But he must have been drunk because the boat turned over in the water."

"Miz Caskey, you were foolish to go out there! Look at what he did in here. You might have got yourself shot!" cried Sheriff Key.

"I had a gun," Elinor said coldly. "And the fact was, we didn't see the law crawling all over the house trying to protect us. Oscar was firing at Carl from our window, and I went out to get him from behind."

"Did you shoot?"

"I didn't have to. The river got him. Sheriff," Elinor went on, laying ironic stress upon the title, "Oscar and I appreciate your dropping by—and we're glad you waited till most of the excitement was over, earlier we wouldn't have had much of a chance to speak—but could you excuse us now, please? I've got to finish bandaging my little girl."

"We're gone drag that river," said Charley Key importantly. "We're gone take care of Carl Strickland!"

“Charley,” Oscar reminded him, “that’s exactly what I asked you to do a few weeks ago, but you couldn’t be bothered. You didn’t want to do me any favors. Well, right now, Queenie Strickland, still black and blue, is upstairs crying in the bedroom. My little girl here is all cut up with glass. Our house has every damn window in it broken. And Carl Strickland is spinning round and round in the junction. Why don’t you just go home and get some sleep?”

Zaddie swept a large pile of splintered wood and shattered glass between the balusters, and it fell to the hallway below with a musical crash and a cloud of dust.

. . .

Frances refused to return to the front room that night. Elinor was about to insist, but Zaddie interceded for the child. “Miss El’nor, she still scairt. Let her sleep with me.”

“You don’t have more than a three-quarter bed, Zaddie!”

“I don’t care, Mama!” cried Frances desperately, and was reluctantly allowed to sleep in the room behind the kitchen. It was made clear to her, however, that this indulgence was solely on account of Carl Strickland’s attack.

Toward dawn, when the house was quiet again, and the children were asleep, Elinor and Oscar lay awake in their bed. A breeze off the river—smelling of both the water and the red clay of the levee—blew through the windows that had been shattered by Carl Strickland’s gunfire.

“Can’t sleep, Oscar?”

“No, I cain’t.”

“Because of the excitement?”

“Yes, partly. I was thinking, Elinor.”

“Thinking what?”

“Thinking that what you told old Charley Key was a lie.”

“Course it was a lie,” returned Elinor quickly. “You think I’m going to waste the truth on that nincompoop?”

“What happened out there with you and Carl?”

Elinor didn’t immediately reply. She turned over in the bed and put her arm across Oscar’s chest.

“What do you think happened, Oscar?”

Oscar lay still a few moments. The dawn dimly lighted the room now.

“I don’t know,” said Oscar. “What you told Charley Key was a lie—you didn’t have a gun. When you came back into the house, your nightgown was dripping river water. Your bare feet had Perdido mud on ’em. I knew you had been in the water, because when you walked back into the house, you brought the *smell* of that river back here with you. How you’re ever gone be able to wear that gown again, I don’t know.”

Elinor snuggled closer to Oscar’s side in the bed. She wound her arm around him and pressed her foot against his feet.

“Carl is dead,” she said in a low voice. “I saw him drowned.”

“I believe you,” said Oscar. He lay staring at the ceiling. His arms were crossed behind his head on the pillow. “I wish,” he went on, “that when I was shooting out the window here, that I had blown Carl’s head off. That’s what I wish. He was firing at this house! He could have hit Frances or you or Queenie or any of us. I would have walloped his head off if I could have gotten close enough. Elinor?”

“What?”

“Did you cause Carl Strickland to die?”

She rubbed her thumb against his neck. “Yes.”

“I thought so,” said Oscar in a low sad voice. “How’d you do it? How’d you get close enough to him without him shooting you?”

Elinor drew her leg across Oscar’s legs and pressed her foot beneath his ankles. She was wound tightly around him.

“What if I tell you?” she said. “Will you be mad?”

“Lord, no,” he said softly. “I just said that *I* would have done it if I could have.”

“It was dark,” said Elinor. Her head was next to his on the pillow, and she spoke softly in his ear. “He couldn’t see me. I swam under the water and overturned his boat as he was going across.”

“Did he fight you?”

“No, he didn’t even know I had done it,” said Elinor.

“Were you *trying* to kill him?”

“Not really,” said Elinor. “I just wanted to get those guns of his wet so it would ruin them. But he panicked once he was in the water. I saw him struggling, then I saw him drown.”

“Did you try to save him then?”

“No,” said Elinor. “I can’t say that I did. Are you upset? Do you think I should have tried?”

"No, no," sighed Oscar. "I think you did just right. I just wish you hadn't had to do it. Is this gone be on your conscience?"

"I don't think so," said Elinor.

"Good," said Oscar, "'cause it shouldn't be. Carl Strickland brought this on himself. If you hadn't done it, it would only be a matter of time before he came back and killed one of us—Queenie, probably. She was the one he was really aiming for, I guess. It beats hell out of me how some people can get matched up so badly. Poor old Queenie. She'll probably be glad to know Carl's gone. I don't think we should tell her that you killed him, though."

"Oscar, do you think badly of me? You know, some husbands might object to their wives going out in the night and killing people."

Oscar gave a short little laugh. "Not me. At least not until you start making a habit of it."

"You seem a little upset, though."

"I am," said Oscar. "It should have been me that went out and killed him, not you. I should have it on *my* conscience."

"How would you have done it?" laughed Elinor. "Oscar, you know you couldn't hit the levee with the rifle if you were standing twenty feet away. And you know you wouldn't go swimming in the Perdido in the middle of the night. It *had* to be me."

"I suppose. But listen, Elinor, if there's got to be any more killing in this family, you let *me* handle it from now on, hear? Now, are you ready to try to get some sleep?"

"Not yet," she whispered.

Elinor had bathed, and her nightgown was fresh, but in that dawn following the death of Carl Strickland, Oscar found that the smell of the river was still caught in his wife's hair and in her limbs twined around his body.

. . .

Early the next morning, Bray and Oscar carried Queenie Strickland in a folding chair up to the top of the levee. Elinor brought her an umbrella against the sun, and then, joined by Zaddie, Frances, and Queenie's children, the entire household settled in to watch the dragging operation.

Within half an hour the state police came up with Carl's three rifles, which were identified by Queenie and Malcolm. Nothing could be found of Carl.

“Queenie,” said James, who had joined the group on the levee, and now stood sympathetically at Queenie’s side, “I’m so sorry.”

“What for? What for, James?” cried Queenie. “Do you see what that man did to me? Do you know I may limp for the rest of my life? Do you know that I may be blind in one eye? Carl Strickland broke every single window in the back of Elinor and Oscar’s house! It was a miracle nobody was killed. Have you seen the cuts on Frances’s face?” Queenie held the umbrella above her head, twirling it in her agitation.

In the course of the morning, most of the rest of Perdido climbed the levee and walked along it to where Queenie sat watching the highway patrol and Sheriff Key in their boats below. Everyone knew that it was probably a pointless operation to drag the river. The current was swift, and the junction an inexorable maelstrom from which bodies were almost never recovered. Carl Strickland, though, had been a criminal, and it had been thought a good idea to attempt to prove his death.

Mary-Love made a brief appearance, hand-in-hand with Miriam. “Queenie,” she said, “why’d you bring that man to town? Why didn’t you leave him in Nashville? He was shooting off those guns at night! He could have got his aim wrong and shot my precious little Miriam in her room next door!”

“Those guns woke me up!” added Miriam in a petulant parenthesis.

“Mary-Love, I tell you, I didn’t do it on purpose…”

“I sure hope they find him down there. Then we could be sure he’ll never be coming back here again. I don’t think Miriam and I got *one* wink of sleep after your husband started firing those guns! Just the echoes were hurting my ears!”

“I hope they find him too,” said Queenie. She reached into the pocket of her dress and clacked together the two silver coins there. “Mary-Love, I want to see that man laid out on the bank of the river, and when I do, I’m gone slide right down this levee. See, I got these two quarters for Carl Strickland’s eyes…”

Carl Strickland’s body never was found, and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he had drowned. His automobile was found parked in the live oak grove, his guns lay on the bed of the river, fragments of his boat washed up against the side of the levee down below the junction. At school Malcolm told prideful stories of his father’s attempt to murder them all: “He was aiming right at my head, but I ducked! I wasn’t gone let him shoot

me!" Lucille pretended grief in order to be excused from participating in unwanted class activities.

The third day's dragging was desultory; only one policeman with a metal hook was being slowly propelled about by Bray in his boat. Queenie, watching from the levee, said to Ivey Sapp, who had brought up a pitcher of iced tea: "What do you think I ought to do about these quarters, Ivey? You think I should hold on to 'em?"

"Mr. Carl ain't gone be coming back, Miss Queenie."

"You sure?"

"They not never gone find him."

"I wish I could be sure!"

"Miss Queenie, you stand up here, and you throw those quarters in the river. That'll keep down his bones."

With Ivey's assistance, Queenie stood from her chair and flung the coins into the muddy red water.

Chapter 35

The Test

Carl Strickland's two attempts to murder his wife had overshadowed, in Perdido's view, Wall Street's accumulating disasters. The stock market had crashed, but who in Perdido besides the mill owners had had much anyway? So no one paid much attention to the stock market business, but everyone in town breathlessly waited to see what would become of Queenie Strickland. She returned to her job at the mill. She flung open the doors of her house and never locked them at all now. She took her Malcolm and Lucille to the Ritz Theater every time there was a change in the bill and seemed to have as much fun as if she were a child herself, released from school a week early in May.

Queenie's recovery was rapid. The day after she certified her husband's death by flinging the two coins into the water, she returned to her own home. This evacuation was fortunate, for when Frances waked in Zaddie's bed the day after Carl had shot at the house, she had developed a sort of palsy of the hands and feet—uncommon in a seven-year-old—that Dr. Benquith diagnosed as incipient arthritis. Frances was out of school for a month. During that time her mother nursed her constantly without complaint. Queenie was certain that it had been brought on by Carl's attack on the house. Most of Perdido agreed with this, ignoring Dr. Benquith's assertion that arthritis was *not* brought on merely by an unpleasant experience.

More than a year passed, and Queenie's happiness became as conspicuous to the residents of Perdido as her troubles had been before. Now, however, that crisis of paper and faith in New York was beginning to have repercussions in Perdido. No one, not even the foresighted Caskeys, had anticipated how great and unsettling those effects were to prove.

The bank closed during Christmas week of 1930. Every white man and woman in town lost money.

Despite the fact that demand for wood and wood products was down, the mills continued to operate. There were no layoffs, though some days there wasn't enough work to be parceled out to the yard hands at the mills,

and often the lumber business seemed no more than a charitable exercise on the parts of the Turks and the Caskeys.

Perdido seemed to suffer less than many parts of the country. Or perhaps it just seemed that way; Perdido was, after all, accustomed to hardship. The prosperity of the twenties had made only mincing steps toward rural Alabama, and when she whirled about and fled with a flash of skirts from the rest of the country, Perdido had enjoyed so little of her company that it scarcely missed her. The privations of the Civil War seemed recent, and there were old black men and women in Baptist Bottom who had been born slaves. Mary-Love Caskey and Manda Turk both had been born during the humiliating privations of Reconstruction. But, certainly there was less to go around now. Grady Henderson's "fancy goods store" dwindled to a simple grocery, and Leo Benquith bartered chickens, pork loins, and quarts of shelled peas for his services as a physician. At the school there was a greater incidence of ringworm and rickets. Ample and decent food soared beyond the means of poorer families. Several downtown shops closed, and the Osceola Hotel would have shut its doors had not Henry and Oscar lent the Moyes enough money to keep it going. The Osceola was needed by the mills for the housing of the few buyers who came in from the hard-hit North. Collections in the churches were sparser than in previous years, though attendance was up. Perhaps for the same reason, the Ritz Theater—including the colored folks' balcony—was filled nearly every night.

Yet the Caskeys remained solvent. Oscar's diversification of the operations of the mill insured that some portion of the enterprise remained profitable. Mary-Love's money had fortuitously been invested in things that were not so much affected by the Depression. There were, however, no more jaunts to Mobile and Birmingham for the purchase of new tablecloths and dresses. Mary-Love wore her old outfits, or commissioned straitened Miz Daughtry to make her new ones. Oscar hung about the mill all day with very little to do.

James Caskey suffered more than Mary-Love. Most of his stocks had lost much or all of their value, and the company yielded almost no return at all. Despite the unaccustomed financial ills, he was happy again. At sixty, he actually enjoyed the slower pace of the mill, which rolled along with very little help from him. He and Queenie were fast friends now. They lunched together every day at his house and spent the afternoon talking in

the office. He quietly spent his evenings at home, listening to the radio. Danjo often sat on the sofa next to him, looking through books and asking his uncle's help with difficult words. James's wants were few, and it was his delight to take care of those who needed taking care of. When Roxie went for groceries, he made certain she bought enough to feed not only himself and Danjo, but her husband and her four children as well. Queenie received a raise almost every month and was always paid in cash out of James's pocket. Every week at Vanderbilt, Grace's female chums gasped in astonishment as *another* sheaf of five-dollar bills arrived in a plain envelope. James did almost nothing for himself, and scarcely could be persuaded to buy himself a new suit at Easter. He made no more purchases of porcelain figures or sterling silver cake-servers, saying—reasonably enough—that his house was full of such stuff anyway.

Only Oscar and Elinor encountered real difficulties. Oscar was still in debt on the land he had purchased from Tom DeBordenave, and because there was so little cutting, his income from the land was severely reduced. His meager return went to the bank in Pensacola. Oscar and Elinor still lived on Oscar's salary alone.

In the spring of 1931, the bank called in Oscar's loan. That afternoon, without saying a word to anyone, Oscar drove to Pensacola and obtained an interview with the president of the bank. Oscar was told that the bank itself was in difficulties. The loan had been called in as a measure against an involuntary closing. However, the Caskeys had done a great deal of business with the institution over the years, so it was therefore agreed—after a hurried meeting of the trustees—that only half of Oscar's outstanding debt need be brought in.

That evening Oscar visited his mother. Closeted in her room with the door closed, he asked her to lend him one hundred and eleven thousand dollars to preserve his investment, his financial well-being, the honor of the Caskey name, and the future of the mill. She wouldn't do it.

"Oscar, I told you not to buy that land."

"You didn't, Mama," replied Oscar calmly. "You didn't even find out about it until later."

"If you had had the courtesy to speak to me about it beforehand, I would have told you not to buy it. I'm glad that the bank is doing this. You have no business being saddled with all that land."

“Mama, it’s got *trees* on it. Every single acre has been planted with yellow pine.”

“Oscar,” she said, “James and I own two hundred thousand acres of land in Escambia County, Monroe County, and this county. Every one of those two hundred thousand acres is planted with yellow pine, and longleaf pine, and slash pine. And when was the last time we had an order for ten board feet of lumber? Was it day before yesterday, or was it three weeks ago? Lord, Oscar, we cain’t even *begin* to harvest what we’ve got now!”

“Mama, are you deliberately misunderstanding me?” Oscar asked. He glanced out his mother’s bedroom window at his own home next door. He could see his wife and daughter sitting on the swing in the sleeping porch. They sat beneath a red-fringed lamp, and Elinor was reading to Frances in a soft voice he could hear as a murmur.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I am asking you to lend me the money for my own sake, not for the mill’s. That land is all I’ve got in the world. If I lose it then I don’t have anything.”

“You have your house.”

“Mama, that house belongs to you. You have never given me the deed,” replied Oscar sadly.

“You have your work at the mill.”

“Yes, I do,” returned Oscar. “And I have near about worked myself to death for that mill. Every penny of the money I’ve made has gone to you and James—now wait, I’m not complaining. I was glad to do it. It’s the Caskey mill, and I’m a Caskey, but, Mama, it sure looks to me like you might give me a little something to pay me back for making life so easy for you in these hard times.”

“I don’t call a hundred and eleven thousand dollars ‘a little something.’”

“Mama, you’ve got the money. I know you have. I know you’ve got it, because I *made* that money for you. I wrote the checks and put it in your account in Mobile.”

“I’m not gone throw good money after bad. Oscar, you don’t need that land. Let it go. Let the bank take it back. They had no business lending you money for it in the first place. I’d even like to hear what you used for collateral. You give ’em Frances maybe? The way you gave Miriam to me in exchange for your house?”

Oscar felt embarrassed for the cruelty in his mother's words.

"All right, Mama," he said, rising. His voice and his face were stony.

"You let that land go, you have no business owning property."

"Whatever you say, Mama."

He stood still, looking at her, where she sat in a rocker by the window. Over her shoulder, he could see Elinor and Frances in the soft light of the lamp. He could hear Elinor's voice with that of his daughter blend, as together they read a poem out of the book. The evening was damp and cool. The water oak branches creaked high above the ground. Mary-Love Caskey grew restive beneath her son's gaze.

"Only reason you're doing this is 'cause of Elinor," she said. "If it wasn't for Elinor, you'd be perfectly happy doing what you've always done. She's the one made sure you went over your head in debt for that land that's not ever gone do you one bit of good."

"Mama, is that what you really think?"

"It is. And it's the truth."

"Do you really hate Elinor that much?"

"Shhh! She's gone hear you."

"Do you hate Elinor, Mama, hate her so much you'd send me into bankruptcy just to hurt her?"

"You're gone be all right, Oscar. You think I'd let you starve?"

"No, I don't," said Oscar. "But I do think you'd like to see Elinor and Frances and me kneeling on your back steps, waiting for Miriam to bring us a plate of food."

For a moment, Mary-Love was silent. Her son had never spoken to her in such a manner, and yet there was no anger or emotion in his voice.

"Oscar," she went on as if he had said nothing, "all this is gone teach you a lesson."

"Bankruptcy?"

"It's gone teach you not to try to do things over your head."

Oscar laughed one brief, mirthless laugh. "Mama, I'm not going into bankruptcy. I'm gone keep that land."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you won't help me, James will."

"He won't!"

"Mama, James co-signed the loan. If I default, the bank will go to him for the money. You know that if that happens, James will sell everything he

owns to pay it off. It'll be hard for him, and I hate to put him through it, but he'll see that the bank is paid. Then I'll owe *him* the money instead of owing it to the bank."

"Lord, Oscar, if this is true, then why in the world did you come to me?"

"Because you're my mama and you're rich and I have worked for you all my life. I *made* you rich, and it was time that you did a little something to help me."

"I'll help you, Oscar, I'd help you with anything."

"No, Mama," said Oscar. He had gone to the door, and leaned his back against it, twisting the knob in his hands. "You wouldn't. You just said you wouldn't. You just said you had rather send me into bankruptcy than help me out—even though, in the end, you'd be hurting the mill and James and yourself. You'd do all that just to spite Elinor and spite me for marrying her."

"You did this as a test, Oscar! You didn't have any intention of trying to borrow from me, you just wanted to see if I'd give in, that's all! That's despicable of you, that's—"

"No, Mama," said Oscar, shaking his head, and his soft voice overcame her angry tone. "I really needed you this time. James had helped me before, and now I wanted *you* to help me, but you wouldn't do it. That makes me real sad, Mama..."

"What are you gone do, Oscar?" Mary-Love asked, in a low, mistrustful voice. The test might not be over yet.

"I'm gone borrow the money from James. I told you that."

"Are you sure he's got it? Are you sure he'll give it to you?"

"Yes," said Oscar. "I'm sure he will. Nobody's gone default. I'll come through it, and someday I'll pay James back. And the Caskey mill will come through, and Mama, you're just gone get richer and richer. And when you die, we're gone fill your coffin with hundred-dollar bills, and we're gone put you in the cemetery right next to Genevieve—and I guess you'll have the time of your life, with Genevieve to keep you company and all that money to keep you warm."

After her son had gone home Mary-Love sat in her darkened room and looked out of her window. She saw Oscar appear on the screened porch next door, saw him kiss Elinor and take up Frances. She heard his murmuring voice as he read to his daughter.

. . .

The next day Luvadia Sapp knocked on Elinor's door. "Morning, Luvadia," Elinor said in greeting. "Is there something you need?"

"Miss Mary-Love tell me to give you this," replied Luvadia, holding out a folded document with a red seal. That morning in the office of the clerk of probate, Mary-Love had signed over the house to Oscar and Elinor.

Chapter 36

At the River's Source

In dealing with her son's request for a loan, Mary-Love had not understood that there are some acts that are unforgivable. Oscar had been only half right in telling his mother that she wanted him to go bankrupt to spite Elinor; she also wanted to make certain that her son would always remain dependent. If Mary-Love had realized that James would lend Oscar the money—and she *should* have realized that—then she would not have had a moment's hesitation in helping out her son. In that way, she also realized later, she might have maintained her position as the Caskey cornucopia.

When she had refused her son, Oscar went to James, who sold off a sheaf of bonds and handed the money over to Oscar without a murmur or a reproach. Half of Oscar's outstanding debt to the bank was immediately canceled, and his monthly payments on the remainder were consequently eased. He and Elinor were left with more than they had had to get along with formerly. It was true that Oscar was now heavily indebted to his uncle, as well as to the bank, but James would rather have gone bankrupt himself than inconvenience his nephew by demanding repayment of this sum.

Oscar felt that he had outwitted his mother. Yet his victory did not make him forgiving toward her. He had told no one of her refusal to help him, but now he barely spoke to Mary-Love. When she lay in wait for him on her front porch, and beckoned to him as he got out of his automobile, he'd only reply, in his blandest voice, "Hey, Mama, sorry I cain't come over right now, got to go inside. Elinor wants me!" When she called him on the telephone he would politely answer any question she put to him, but would volunteer nothing more, and always rang off as quickly as possible with an unabashedly fabricated excuse. They would sit in the same pew at church—the Caskeys had always sat together—but Oscar called a halt to his attending Mary-Love's Sunday afternoon dinners. After services he and Elinor and Frances would usually drive to Pensacola for dinner at the Hotel Palafox.

Oscar's repudiation was particularly painful to Mary-Love because it wasn't public; she therefore couldn't represent herself as a martyr to Oscar's cruelty. She knew he never said a word against her. He was always

polite when she spoke to him, but nothing on earth would persuade him to have anything to do with her. Mary-Love at last felt compelled to speak to Elinor. She knocked on the door of the big house next door one morning an hour or so before Oscar was expected home for the noon meal.

"I won't stay," Mary-Love assured her daughter-in-law. "I won't even come inside. But, Elinor, can you sit out here on the porch with me a minute."

"Of course," said Elinor, and the two women placed themselves in facing rockers. Across the road from the Caskey houses was a large, fenced pecan orchard, with a number of Holstein heifers grazing in it. No pair of those cows appeared more phlegmatic or imperturbable than Mary-Love Caskey and her daughter-in-law, as they sat on the porch and prepared to do battle.

"Elinor, you got to talk to Oscar."

"About what?"

"About the way he's treating me."

Elinor looked at her mother-in-law without expression. "I don't understand."

"You know what I'm talking about," Mary-Love continued, annoyed that her honesty should not be reciprocated.

"He hasn't been visiting you the way he used to," Elinor admitted. "I've noticed that."

"And he's told you why, hasn't he?"

"No," returned Elinor. "He hasn't said a word."

"Well, didn't you ask?"

"Whatever it is, it's between you and Oscar. I didn't think it was any of my business."

"Elinor, I came to ask you to help me patch things up. It hurts me the way he treats me. I'm embarrassed for Oscar's sake. And I think *you* ought to speak to him about it."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Tell him that people see how he treats me. And people think ill of him for it. If he doesn't watch out, people are going to turn on him for acting toward me the way he does. He should put things back the way they used to be."

"Why should he?" Elinor asked innocently. "I mean, what reason should I give him?"

“Because the whole town is talking, like I said!”

“You’re telling me that you want Oscar to patch things up for *his* sake, not yours? That is, you don’t care one way or the other?”

“No, that’s not what I mean at all!” said Mary-Love. “I *do* care! Oscar hurts me, the way he treats me. We all used to be so happy!” she sighed.

“Miss Mary-Love, I don’t think I’d go so far as to say *that!* But I will speak to Oscar, I will tell him what you said, and I will tell him that he is injuring his reputation in town by his treatment of you.”

“Elinor, what do you think about it?”

“I think it’s between you and Oscar and that it’s none of my business. I’ll speak to Oscar purely as a favor to you.”

Mary-Love Caskey loathed favors done her. She sought desperately for a device that would make Elinor see things differently and relieve her of any possible obligation to her daughter-in-law. “Yes, but wouldn’t you like to see Oscar and me on good terms again? Things would be much easier for you then, too.”

“Miss Mary-Love, it makes not one bit of difference in the world to me what goes on between you and your son. Oscar is a grown man, and Oscar can do exactly what he wants. I think that in the end that will be what Oscar does do about it: exactly what he wants.”

“Elinor,” said Mary-Love, halting the rocker and looking her daughter-in-law straight in the eye, “you sure you don’t know what any of this is about?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

“Elinor, you can sit there and say that, but I’m just not so sure I can believe you.”

“I have no reason to lie to you, Miss Mary-Love. I’ll speak to Oscar.” With this unsatisfactory assurance, Mary-Love departed.

When Oscar came home for lunch, Elinor dutifully reported his mother’s visit, pleas, and exhortations.

Oscar looked at his wife across the table, and said, “Elinor, Mama did something to me that I don’t know if I can ever forgive her for. One thing sure, I haven’t forgiven her yet. And it’s not that I don’t want to, because I do, it’s that I just *cain’t.* And that’s what you can tell her.”

“Oscar, I refuse to act as a go-between. I wish you’d tell your mother that yourself.”

“All right, I suppose I’ll have to. Elinor, did Mama tell you what all this was about?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“If you want to tell me, then tell me. If you don’t want to tell me, then I don’t intend to ask.”

“Well then,” said Oscar, after a pause, “I guess I better go on and tell you.” Oscar told his wife about Mary-Love’s refusal to give him any money and about their confrontation. Elinor made no comment. “What are you thinking?” her husband asked.

“I’m thinking that it’s a wonder you speak to her at all. It’s one thing for her to hate me, but it’s something else for her to injure herself and the entire family.”

To this, her husband made rueful agreement. “Someday,” he said sadly, “we are gone look out the dining room window and see the barnyard fowl lining up on Mama’s rain gutter.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someday,” Oscar explained, “Mama’s chickens are gone come home to roost.”

Mary-Love intercepted her son as he left the house on his way back to work a half hour later. She had been sitting on her front porch, and she hurried over just as he was getting into his car.

“Oscar, did Elinor speak to you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well? Did she tell you how you were being talked about all over town because of your treatment of me?”

Oscar put his hand on the hood of the car. “Mama,” he said softly, “that’s just like you.”

“What is?”

“I think it would kill you just to come out and say, ‘Oscar, what you’re doing is hurting *me.*’ Instead you’re saying, ‘Oscar, I don’t care about me, but you’re hurting yourself.’ You always have to be the one who does the favors. Well, Mama, if it’s not hurting you, then that’s fine. Go on back inside the house. Leave me alone.”

. . .

During this unhappy time for Mary-Love and Oscar, James Caskey and Danjo Strickland were getting along wonderfully well. Now seven, Danjo

felt secure in his position. His father was dead and unlikely to claim him again. His mother seemed content only to visit him, though this she did nearly every day. James had recently purchased a car, and Danjo had been staked as no part of that transaction. Grace returned from Vanderbilt for summers and holiday vacations. Twice James and Danjo had driven up to Nashville to visit her.

Grace loved the boy for James's sake, and whenever she saw him the first thing she invariably asked was, "Are you taking care of my daddy?"

Danjo always nodded vigorously and replied proudly, "He said he couldn't get along without me!"

"I don't think he could!" Grace always cried, hugging her father until the breath was nearly squeezed out of him.

It seemed that all had worked out for the best. Grace had abandoned her father, but James never tired of saying, "I was so lonesome when Grace left that I went down to the Ben Franklin and bought me a little boy. He cost me a dollar fifty-nine, but he's been worth every penny."

Grace was happy at school. This was always evident to James when he and Danjo visited her in Nashville. Her room was crammed with furniture James had bought. She had pennants on the walls. Oriental parasols opened and suspended from the ceiling had electric light bulbs hidden behind them. There were layers of carpet on the floor and two palms and a Victrola sat in one corner.

James could also see that Grace was very popular. Every time he walked into the room a bevy of young women who had been lounging there jumped up and shook his hand, hugged Danjo, and all cried out, "What'd you bring Grace *this* time, Mr. Caskey?" Besides the sheaf of five-dollar bills in the unmarked envelope, he usually had a vast package tied up in brown paper and string, sitting downstairs in the hallway. Grace would unwrap it, and a pleasant half hour was then spent in trying to find a place to put whatever it was James had brought. James always took Grace out to dinner alone on Friday night, but on Saturday night he treated almost the entire dormitory at a restaurant. Nobody on earth was blessed with a sweeter father than Grace Caskey. No man's daughter was better loved than Grace Caskey.

"Have you made acquaintance with the man of your dreams?" was James's invariable question when he and Grace were alone together.

"Ugh!" Grace always cried. "Why should I want to do that?"

“So you can settle down and get married, that’s why,” James would return mildly.

“I don’t want to get married, Daddy. I’m having a good time. I don’t think I’ve let myself be introduced to one single man on this campus.”

James would laugh. “Well, darling, if you don’t even let ’em know your name, how are they supposed to propose to you?”

“I don’t want them to! And I’ll beat ’em over the head if they try.”

This did not seem such an idle threat. At college, Grace Caskey had discovered the delights of physical culture, and she had a closetful of white tennis dresses, white boating clothes, white gymnasium pants, and white football sweaters. Her many handsome sporting outfits began to crowd out her regular wardrobe. Her favorite pastime was rowing, and she was unanimously elected captain of the girls’ crew team when she was a junior. She also ran track and played basketball, where the Caskey height stood her in good stead. In this rough-and-tumble atmosphere, Grace acquired a forthrightness and heartiness of demeanor that was shocking to those in Perdido who remembered her only as a slight, somewhat diffident, whiny child. Grace had become strong enough actually to lift her father bodily from the floor, and now whenever they met, she did it.

The summers of Grace’s college years were particularly pleasant for James Caskey, for Grace returned at the beginning of June, and didn’t leave again until the beginning of September. He always told her to go off and have a good time and not think about him, but Grace would only reply, “Daddy, I miss you so much up there, sometimes I think I ought to pack you in my trunk and keep you with me. You don’t think I’m gone do anything in my summers but sit on your front porch and rock, do you?”

“Won’t you be lonely?”

But Grace was hardly lonely during these summers, for she sent out invitations to all her friends to come and visit her in the pokiest town on earth, Perdido, Alabama. Evidently Grace herself was sufficient draw, because the girls came and stayed for days or weeks. James’s house was filled with young women and young women’s clothing and young women’s hearty voices and heartier laughter. When there wasn’t any more room at James’s, the girls stayed at Elinor’s, or even at Queenie’s. They never stayed at Mary-Love’s, who disapproved of any member of the Caskey family maintaining a friendship. The girls rowed on the Perdido, took cooking lessons from Roxie, went in a bevy to the Ritz Theater, played

boisterous tag among the water oaks, and visited Lake Pinchona relentlessly to swim, feed the alligator, and annoy the monkey. They made impromptu excursions to Mobile or down to the Pensacola beaches or up to Brewton to pick scuppernongs. They would travel over to Fort Mims to play hide-and-seek among the ruins of Alabama's first capital, have picnics in the green fields along the Alabama river, or make daring raft excursions down the turbulent Styx. Danjo was often picked up squealing and flung into the back of Grace's Pontiac with a cry of, "Danjo, we're kidnapping you and you're never gone see Mr. Caskey again."

"Grace's girls," as they came quickly to be known around town, were a formidable bunch, certainly too much for the few college men that Perdido produced to handle. Young Perdido manhood found companionship with the girls occasionally on the dance floor at the lake, but was otherwise contemptuously ignored. The girls made much of James Caskey and Danjo Strickland, so that the boy and his uncle—accustomed to the winter quietness of Perdido and only each other for company—were always quite bewildered by the energy, the lightheartedness, and the noise of it all.

In the spring of 1933, Grace Caskey graduated from Vanderbilt with a degree in history, and five letters in women's athletics. Her father had never asked her what she intended to do after graduation, but once he had said, "Grace, if you ever decide on anything, let me know, will you?" With a particularly good friend, Grace applied for a position at a girls' school in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and was overjoyed that they were both offered jobs. Her friend was to teach English literature, and Grace was in charge of the gymnasium. Grace's girls came down to Perdido that summer as in the past, but the time was tinged with melancholy. Already some of the girls were engaged, and it was obvious to them all that these happy months of laughter and company could never be repeated. This summer, Grace's girls paid particular attention to Frances, who seemed frailer than ever, after her bout with arthritis two years before. The activity and the attention seemed to do much to lift the eleven-year-old's spirits. Miriam tried to be contemptuous of the intimacy that Frances enjoyed with the co-eds; mostly, however, she was angry that she was so rarely asked to take part in their frequent excursions.

Melancholy seasons end quicker than happy ones, and Grace's girls broke up, never again to be joined together. Grace remained alone with her

family another week before James would drive her up to Spartanburg and see her installed there.

On the second of September, 1933, the weather in Perdido was still brutally hot, but James Caskey was already pining beneath the weight of autumn when his daughter would leave him for good.

Grace said, “Daddy, why don’t just you and I go out in the boat this afternoon? Let me take you for a ride up the Perdido.”

“Who’ll take care of Danjo?”

“Roxie’s here.”

“I mean, who’ll take care of Danjo when you and I and that little green boat all get washed down to the junction?”

Grace laughed merrily. “Daddy, don’t you realize that I’m strong enough to avoid the junction? Just like Elinor can. Besides, we won’t even go that way, we’ll go upstream.”

“Darling, I tell you what—why don’t you take Frances? She’s gone miss you so much, and this way you can get to talk to her alone for a while.”

Grace thought this a fine idea. Without a moment’s hesitation she went over and stood underneath the screened porch and called up to Elinor.

“Mama’s not here,” said Frances, leaning on the rail and looking down.

“Where’d she go?”

“She went swimming, it was so hot.”

“In the Perdido?” asked Grace.

“Uh-hunh.”

“I didn’t really want your mama anyway, Frances. I wanted to ask you if you wanted to take a little ride in the boat. You think your mother would mind if I took you out on the water?”

“Not one bit! She’s always *wanting* me to go out on the river!”

“Then come on down, and we’ll see if we cain’t sneak up on her and surprise her in the water.”

Grace’s boat was tied to a tree where the levee ended in a steep slope a hundred yards or so upstream. Grace shoved the boat halfway into the water and let Frances climb in so that she wouldn’t have to wet her feet. Then she pushed the boat farther out and jumped in herself. The current immediately began dragging the boat downstream, and Frances nervously called out, “Whoooa!”

Grace paddled hard against the current, and after only a few moments they were headed upstream. The Perdido was fed by many hundreds of tiny branches of water, most of which were so insubstantial and ephemeral they hadn't even the strength to dig channels for themselves across the floor of the forest. Along the course of the uninhabited upper river, these freshets slipped rapidly over beds of decaying pine needles and oak leaves and poured into the Perdido with low, furtive gurglings. As Grace and Frances ascended the river, this was the only sound to be heard. They might have been the water voices of small gilled creatures, stationed sentrylike along the banks of the ever-narrowing river, announcing the upstream progress of the young woman and the young girl in their boat.

"I don't see Mama," said Frances. "Maybe she went the other direction."

As they proceeded up the river, far past any point that was familiar to either Grace or Frances, the Perdido grew shallow and quiet. The freshets, like sentinels whose commander has been apprised of the approach of strangers, had now fallen silent. Once Grace raised her paddle high and brought it down swiftly on a water moccasin gliding past them. It was not because they were in danger, but she followed the general philosophy that poisonous things, like gentlemen who made proposals of marriage, ought to be beaten over the head.

"I've never been this far up," Frances remarked with wonder at the wildness of the country through which they were traveling. They seemed far from Perdido.

"Look," said Grace pointing upward, "those are wild orchids on the branches of those oaks. It's so lonely up here..."

"Have you ever been all the way up to the source?"

"No, I haven't. I've never even heard of anybody going all that way—I guess somebody must have, but nobody's ever told me. Frances, shall we try to find it?"

"What if it's twenty miles or something?"

"It's not. 'Cause if it were, Highway 31 would cross it and I know it doesn't, so the source cain't be more than five or six miles away."

"But if this old river starts winding around..."

"I don't mind paddling. Only thing is, at some point we may have to get out and walk."

“I don’t mind that,” said Frances. So Grace continued to ply her paddle. The river narrowed until it was no more than a creek, then only a branch. It never, however, lost its muddy red color. Even with Grace’s paddle often gouging pebbles and mud from the bed, they were never able to see to the bottom. The trees that overhung the little stream, shading it from the sun, were mostly hardwoods, not pine at all. The forest was thick here, its floor spongy with fallen trees and rotting leaves.

“Frances, you know what? I don’t think this land has ever been cut.”

“Really? Who does it belong to?”

“I’ve been trying to figure, and you know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think this used to be Tom DeBordenave’s property, and it’s some of the land that he sold to your daddy. That’s about what I make out.”

As Grace made this observation, she engineered a sharp turn around a massive fallen oak that had at one point rerouted the stream. Ahead of them was a small muddy pool of reddish water, its surface quivering and suffused with ripples. All around it was a stand of tall, gray, massive water oaks—far taller than those Elinor had years ago planted in the sandy Caskey yards. The slender trunks gravely swayed in the slight breeze and masses of leathery leaves quaked in their hundred-foot crowns. The ground was a thicket of rotting fallen limbs with no vegetation except the scaly green fungus that seemed the parasite peculiar to the species.

“This is it,” murmured Grace. “This is where the Perdido starts.”

There was something solemn in the place. The tall, sentinel-like trees seemed almost ominous; and the little red pool that was the source of the Perdido looked threatening with its nervous, rippling activity. Even the birds seemed to have abandoned the place. The sun fell behind the water oaks as Grace placed her paddle in the crotch of two branches of the fallen tree, and held the boat stationary. It seemed to Frances that she feared to advance into the pool that was the river’s source.

“Grace,” said Frances after a few moments, “don’t you think we ought to turn back? Mama wouldn’t want us to be on the river after dark.”

“It won’t take us any time at all to get home. I won’t have to paddle at all, except to steer us clear of sandbars. You know,” she said in a lower voice, “it’s a little scary up here. I used to think Perdido was out of the way, but Perdido is nothing compared to *this* place...”

Grace and Frances continued to stare in silence. The spot seemed divorced from the countryside they knew well. It seemed absurd to speak of Oscar's owning such a place, or to think that this glade and pool and stand of water oak might even appear on a map. The source of the Perdido seemed outside all that; seemed to be part of something that rose above lumber leases and land sales and geological surveys. It seemed impossible that a state road or a county bridge or some tenant farmer's shack or some Cherokee's liquor still might be anywhere close by, yet both Grace and Frances knew that all of these were situated no more than a mile or two away. All civilization seemed separated from this strange spot by space and time. Suddenly, Grace gave a little shudder. The atmosphere was abruptly altered. With the paddle, she pushed away from the tree and set the boat back into the current of the river. As she did so, the commotion on the surface of the water of the pool seemed to grow as if a greater amount of water, or of a very different kind had been released from below.

Grace glanced at Frances. She saw that terror had spread over her cousin's face. Frances's body was trembling feverishly, and she convulsively grasped the sides of the boat. "Hurry," she whispered. "Please Grace, hurry."

Grace paddled energetically and in another moment they were around the sharp bend around the fallen tree. With that, Frances felt a bit calmer, and she could not resist a glance back at the muddy red pool that was the source of the Perdido. In a moment, it was beyond her sight, obscured by another bend of the river. But in that moment, slowly breaking the surface of the water, Frances Caskey saw a face, wide and pale green, with bulging eyes and no nose at all. Something about it—despite the horror of it—was familiar to her.

"Mama," she whispered, but Grace did not hear.

Chapter 37

Upstairs

Grace was silent on the journey back down the Perdido. As they were carried along by the current of the ever-widening river, Frances sat rigidly in the front of the boat, facing away from her cousin.

"Frances, are you all right?" Grace asked anxiously more than once.

Frances nodded weakly, but did not turn around.

After Grace had tied the boat to the tree near the end of the levee she discovered that Frances was unable to walk. Grace had to carry her all the way back to the house.

Elinor still had not returned, but Zaddie took one look at the child in Grace's arms, and said, with ominous significance, "That's the arthritis again."

Frances was taken upstairs and put into bed. Grace sat at her side until Elinor returned, a half hour later.

Grace was nearly in tears. "Elinor, it's my fault!"

"Don't be silly," said Elinor sternly. "Dr. Benquith said it could come back at any time."

The child lay in a feverish doze. When she woke late that night, the palsy in her legs had got no better.

In her last days in Perdido, Grace Caskey was convinced that the excursion to the source of the Perdido was solely responsible for the recurrence of Frances's crippling ailment. Elinor, Oscar, James, and Frances herself did what they could to assure Grace that it was not so.

Grace left for Spartanburg, and when she returned at Christmas, Frances still had not got up from her bed. Dr. Benquith had wanted to send the child to Sacred Heart in Pensacola, or even to one of the big hospitals in Cincinnati, but Elinor would not hear of this. "I'm going to continue to nurse my child until she's better."

Nothing seemed to ease Frances's pain but warm baths. For two hours every morning, two hours every afternoon, and for an hour in the evening after supper, Elinor sat at the side of the bathtub, sponging water over Frances's helpless limbs. The child seemed always weary. Sometimes her eyelids twitched with some pain that had registered in her brain, but she

never complained. Elinor gave up playing bridge; she no longer went to church. She didn't like to leave her daughter. There was never the air of the martyr about her, never the sense that she was sacrificing anything for Frances. On her good days, the girl was carried out onto the screened porch and laid in a little cot-bed.

But Frances's good days were infrequent. At times she appeared to have no mind whatsoever. She lay uncomplaining in her bed, twitching violently when overtaken by the palsy, perfectly still at all other times. Looking at her clenched hands, Oscar was certain that Frances was tense and bitter. Elinor said that contraction of her fingers into uncontrolled claws was only the arthritis, as were her in-turning, twisted feet. Occasionally the girl made an effort to reply when she was spoken to directly, but more often she did not. Nothing held her interest. Nothing could bring emotion into her face, not a Christmas stocking nailed to the hearth in her room, not a cake with lighted candles on her birthday, not Malcolm's Fourth of July firecrackers. When it was time for her bath, Elinor lifted her daughter from the bed. Oscar hated to see this more than anything else about the sickness. He saw that Frances wanted desperately to clasp her arms about her mother's neck, but all those muscles seemed atrophied or recalcitrant, and the thin pathetic limbs hung limply down Elinor's back.

Frances missed the sixth and seventh grades. Elinor borrowed books from the school and kept up with her daughter's lessons, but how much of her mother's reading Frances comprehended, no one could be certain. Oscar and Elinor's household was completely altered during Frances's enfeeblement. Elinor withdrew from Perdido society. She became a voluntary drudge to her daughter's meager comfort. Oscar ventured to object: "Let Zaddie do some of the work, Elinor. You act like it was your fault that Frances got sick again. It wasn't anybody's fault."

Elinor paid no attention to her husband. She rose at five and on winter mornings built a coal fire for Frances. She kept it going all day. When she wasn't bathing Frances, she was reading to her, or feeding her, or simply sitting at the side of the bed rubbing alcohol onto Frances's wasting limbs. Before each bath, Elinor took two pails and walked through the pine forest to the west of the house and around the end of the levee. She filled the pails with water from the river and brought them back to the house. They were warmed in a great pot on the stove and carried upstairs. One of these pails was added directly to Frances's bath; the other was sponged over Frances's

twitching limbs. Oscar and Dr. Benquith couldn't understand this worthless treatment, but there was no talking Elinor out of it. When Mary-Love heard of it, she declared that Frances must be red as an Indian by now with all that Perdido water poured over her.

This for Frances was a blurry time of confusion and weakness. Her brain seemed to have taken on the same palsy as her limbs. She slept and woke and ate and heard her mother read all in a state of only partial awareness. She sat in the bathtub with equal lassitude and low consciousness. She seemed always feverish, always dreaming. She was never certain whether she had fully awakened after that trip up to the source of the river with Grace. The only time total consciousness approached was when Elinor lifted her out of the bath. She felt the muddy Perdido water wash off her and drip back into the bathtub. This was the only thing in Frances's life that was sharp, except for the pain that racked her limbs. Hours faded, days drifted by, season slipped into season, and she did not know whether Thanksgiving had just passed, or whether it was already summer. Everything she felt was dreamlike and vague, except for the pain in her legs and arms—and the water of the Perdido slipping from her body.

Eventually, Frances Caskey's health began to improve. Dr. Benquith called it remission. Mary-Love sententiously claimed it was her prayers. Ivey Sapp said it was red Perdido water.

Frances's hands became less clawed. Once more she was able to hold a pencil long enough to write a note to Grace in Spartanburg, to say how well she was coming along. She could lift a glass without spilling its contents. She could use a fork, though it would be some time before she regained the strength and agility to employ a knife at the same time. On the porch, she sat in a wheelchair. In the spring of 1936, nearly three years after she was stricken, she was able to take a few steps by grasping pieces of furniture or woodwork and pulling herself along.

Frances missed three years of school, but she had learned from her mother's excellent tutelage after all, so when she returned she was put back only one grade. But physically she had grown very little in her illness. The first Sunday that she returned with Elinor to the Caskey pew, Mary-Love ungenerously remarked, "Why, Frances, you aren't hardly any bigger than the last time I saw you."

In the three years of illness, Mary-Love Caskey hadn't once visited her granddaughter, though on still summer nights she could hear Frances next

door whimper from her pain. Mary-Love claimed this neglect was only a reluctance to intrude. She said she had feared that Frances would be disturbed by too many visitors, but this excuse fooled no one. If Oscar had ever felt inclined to make things up with his mother, any such feeling was now completely gone. His mother's treatment of Frances seemed a piece of conspicuous cruelty to the child.

Miriam, who had grown tall and thin, said to her sister, "Grandmama said whatever you had was probably infectious, and that's why I never went over to see you. How on earth are you going to catch up, after being out of school for three years? I don't imagine you'll *ever* catch up, really..."

There were other changes, besides her sister's height, that Frances noticed. Perdido looked as if it were falling into decay. Fifteen houses in Baptist Bottom had burned one New Year's Eve, and no one had yet bothered to clear away the rubble. A line of stores downtown was boarded up, and the windows had been smashed. The ragged curtains in the open windows of the Osceola Hotel blew in the wind.

Frances often sat in the kitchen with Zaddie, and was astonished by the number of black children who came to the lattice door and knocked softly. Zaddie always had a plate of cornbread or a part of a ham or a slab of bacon for them to take home. Next day the child would return with the plate, and a thank you from its mother.

Frances asked her mother about this.

"Nobody has anything, darling. I wish we could afford to do more, but even we don't have what we used to."

Frances shook her head; she understood nothing about money.

"We'll be all right," Elinor assured her. "But while you were upstairs"—Elinor always referred to her daughter's illness by that euphemism—"your daddy had some hard times out at the mill. He had to let people go."

"Is it all right now?"

"I don't know. We'll have to wait and see. Henry Turk, it looks like, is going under. He's going to have to sell out."

"To whom?"

Elinor shook her head. "To us, I'd like to think. He hasn't got anything left except his land. He shut down the mill last year. I'd like to get hold of that land, but only your grandmama has the money for that, and I don't think she'll put it up."

“Why not?”

Elinor laughed. “Why am I telling you all this? Do you care?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No, you don’t, darling. You don’t know anything about it, and there’s no reason for you to care one little bit.” Elinor laughed, and held her daughter close.

. . .

When Sister Haskew moved away from Perdido in 1926 and took up residence first in Natchez and later in Chattanooga, she insisted on introducing herself to new acquaintances as Elvennia, her given name. By then she was thirty-five, two years older than her husband, and felt that it was high time she was called by a name that was hers alone, and did not suggest—as the title “Sister” did—that her identity was subservient to a familial relationship. In her occasional visits to Perdido, however, nothing in the world could persuade Mary-Love Caskey from calling her daughter anything but Sister.

This was a minor irritation, however, and no more than was to have been expected from Mary-Love. Sister—or El, rather—was happy in her new life. She liked the sense of rootlessness after so many years of having had such strong bonds to Perdido, to the house in which she had been born, and to her mother. She liked making new friends who knew nothing of what she had been before her marriage to Early, who were wholly ignorant of sawmills and board feet, and didn’t care about her family history. She wrote her mother twice a week, as Mary-Love had commanded, and on alternate weeks wrote to James and to Elinor. Sometimes, when Early was called away for a week or two on a job, Sister would pack her bag and take the train back to Perdido. On these occasions she would always begin to argue with her mother as soon as she walked in the door.

“Hello, Sister!” Mary-Love would cry. “We cain’t tell you how much we have missed you!”

“Mama, everybody calls me El now.”

“Oh, Sister, after all these years, you cain’t expect me to change what I call my little girl...”

Mary-Love’s little girl was now a woman of middle age, and Mary-Love herself was approaching old age, although she would never admit to such a thing.

“Sister,” Mary-Love always wanted to know, “are you settled down yet? Have you got you a good cook?”

“Mama,” said Sister, “I don’t have a cook, I do all the cooking.”

“Oh, Sister, is that man driving you into the ground and making you work all day long?”

“Mama, Early and I cain’t afford to have a cook, so I do it myself.”

“If you lived here, Ivey and I would be able to take care of you. You wouldn’t have to lift a finger.”

It was usually at this point that Sister, weary of making the old arguments, would simply say, “Mama, Early and I are never gone come back here, and the reason we aren’t is that we don’t want to live with you, because you drive us both crazy.”

“I don’t think you and Early are very happy in Chattanooga.”

“We love it there!”

“I don’t believe that you and Early would be happy anywhere.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you and Early had been happy all these years away from me, then you would have had children. Now you’re too old for that. And there must be a reason why you leave your husband and come to see me every three months, Sister.”

“I come to see you, Mama, because every week you are on the telephone for half an hour saying, ‘Sister, why don’t you ever come home?’”

“If you loved your husband the way you should, you wouldn’t be leaving him so often.”

Mary-Love didn’t approve of the independence exhibited by her daughter since her marriage to Early Haskew, and it was only a short step from that to disapproval of the man responsible for Sister’s liberation. Because he wasn’t around, it was convenient to attack him; and because Sister was his wife, she must be ever on the defensive. “I’m still not sure,” Mary-Love said soon after Sister’s arrival on a visit in late winter of 1936, “that Early Haskew was the right man for you, Sister.”

“Who was?”

“Oh, somebody else. Somebody with a little education. A little polish.”

“Early attended Auburn. Early’s been to Europe. I never even got to go to college. And I never got taken to Europe, either.”

“Does he still eat his peas off a knife blade?”

“He does! And he said one day he’d teach me how to do it too!”

“Does he eat that way in a restaurant?”

“Mama, we cain’t afford to go out much.”

Mary-Love shook her head and sighed. “I hate to see you grubbing for money, darling, when I have so much.”

“Then give me some, and I won’t have to grub.”

“I cain’t do that.”

“Why not, Mama? It wouldn’t hurt you to send me a little something now and then.”

“Early would think I was interfering. And I would be.”

“Early would endorse the checks as quick as they came, I believe. Mama, Early doesn’t make a lot of money, but we get by. I don’t have all the dresses I want, and there are times I don’t have two dollars in my purse.”

“I did not raise my little girl to live like that!”

“Then send us some money, Mama.”

“I’ve been thinking,” said Mary-Love.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking we all ought to have a little vacation. Ought to go somewhere. We haven’t been on a trip in a long time.”

“If you want to spend a little money on me that way, that’s all right, too. Where do you want us to go? And who is us?”

“Us is you and Miriam and me.”

“Not Early?”

“Early’s gone be working, I would suppose.”

“Maybe not,” said Sister, hoping to annoy her mother.

“I was thinking of going to Chicago in the summer.”

“What for?”

“It’s been preying on my mind—I would like to see the sights of Chicago before I die.”

Chapter 38

Nectar

Sister knew that her husband had work contracted for the entire summer of 1936. Out of mischief, she said nothing of this to her mother until Mary-Love had consented to pay Early's way to Chicago. The day after Sister returned to Chattanooga, she called her mother and said, "Mama, Early cain't go with us after all. He's got a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority down around Sheffield, so I'm gone be free all summer. Anytime you want to go to Chicago is fine with me."

"Oh, Sister, I'm so happy!"

"So listen, you go on and make reservations, get a bunch of train tickets, and why don't you see if there's anybody else who'll go with us?"

"Who else would we want, darling?"

"Oh, James, maybe—and Danjo. Since you're going to take Miriam," Sister added, "maybe you should invite Frances too—"

"Sister, I will do no such thing! I cain't afford to take the whole world. If Frances came along, I'd have to pay for everything for her, Oscar and Elinor cain't afford it. Besides, Frances might get sick again, and then we'd have to cancel the whole trip. I guess it's all right if Danjo comes—he's a sweet enough child and James will pay for him. It might be nice to have James, too, as long as we could hire on an extra baggage car on the way back for all that stuff he's bound to buy."

James agreed to go, but wanted to bring along not only Danjo but Queenie, and Queenie's children, too. Mary-Love grumbled at this, but ultimately acceded with enough bad grace to make James feel guilty for having pressed the matter. Mary-Love's difficulty was not with Queenie herself, but with Malcolm and Lucille. Mary-Love took some comfort in predicting, at least three times every day, that the entire trip would be ruined by that misbehaving pair. Frances was pointedly left out of all these plans. James offered to subsidize Frances's ticket and expenses, and said to Oscar and Elinor, "Lord, y'all, I'm gone have Danjo and Malcolm and Lucille to take care of, one more is not gone make a bit of difference. I'm just gone put 'em all on different-colored leashes..."

Oscar was hesitant to accept his uncle's offer. "Mama is taking Miriam, Mama ought to take Frances, too," he said. "Besides, James, you are paying for a whole raft of people to go up there. You're gone spend a fortune before you get halfway to Chicago."

"I don't mind one bit," James said. This was to be the first great family outing since the onset of the Depression, and James wanted it to include as many Caskeys as possible.

Oscar remained reluctant to let his daughter go, but Elinor finally interceded. She pointed out that for Frances to be left so conspicuously behind would be harder for the child to bear than all the slights and shabby treatment that she was certain to receive from Mary-Love and Miriam during the trip. After having been so long cooped up in the house, a total change would probably do the child a great deal of good. Frances was fourteen and her mother thought that she ought to see a little of the world.

So the party for the trip was set at ten: Mary-Love, Sister, Miriam, James, Danjo, Frances, Queenie, Malcolm, Lucille, and Ivey Sapp. Ivey was being taken along to act as shepherdess or beast-of-burden, as needed. Hotel rooms were secured, tickets on the L&N were bought at the Atmore station, quantities of cash in brand-new bills were obtained from the recently reestablished Perdido bank, wardrobes were augmented in Mobile and Montgomery, new luggage was purchased, insurance was taken out, cameras were loaded with film, and letters were sent off to friends whose homes were en route. The flurry of activity astonished Perdido. The Caskeys might have been setting out on an expedition to the South Pole, for all the planning that was going into this trip. They were to leave early on the morning of the first of July, arrive late the following night in Chicago, remain there ten days, and return to Perdido by way of St. Louis and New Orleans, with five days in each city.

By the end of June the children were frantic with excitement. Sometimes even cautious Frances and diffident Danjo had to be quelled. Sister spent several weeks in Perdido and assisted her mother in the preparations, which would have been a great burden to Mary-Love had Sister not been there to help, and to provide stimulating argument on every point.

The day before the party was to leave, Mary-Love announced that she intended to pay a visit to the big house next door to inspect the clothes and other necessities that had been packed for Frances. To Sister, she said, "I

don’t intend to allow Elinor’s daughter to embarrass us with her paltry wardrobe.”

“Well, Mama,” Sister pointed out in reply, “even if Elinor has packed Frances a suitcase full of rags, there’s not enough time now to do anything about it.”

Mary-Love went next door anyway, for the first time in more than five years, since her ineffectual plea for Elinor’s intercession between her and her son.

“Miss Mary-Love, how are you?” said Elinor at the door, with no more surprise than if her mother-in-law had visited her the day before.

“I am just about driven into the ground, Elinor.”

“Getting everybody ready, I suppose.”

“That’s right. In fact, I just dropped by to make sure that Frances was all set.”

“I am packing her suitcases this very minute. I imagine that tonight I’ll have to hit her over the head with a hammer to get her to go to sleep.”

“All the children are excited,” replied Mary-Love.

“Come on upstairs,” said Elinor, “and see what I’ve packed for her. See if you can think of anything I’ve forgotten.”

“Why, I’d be happy to do that,” said Mary-Love, though she wondered how it was that Elinor was making her inspection trip so easy. As she followed her daughter-in-law into the house, Mary-Love peered into the darkened front parlor and remarked, “Looks like you have been changing things around.”

“A little,” replied Elinor. “Miss Mary-Love, it is burning hot outside. Let me get you some nectar.”

“Oh, Elinor, I am so glad you suggested that! Last week I had a glass of your nectar from Manda Turk, and it was the best stuff I’ve ever tasted. Who gathers your blackberries for you?”

“I send Luvadia and Frances. Go on upstairs and I’ll fix us both some. I’m a little thirsty too. Frances’s room is right next to the sleeping porch. The suitcases are open on her bed.”

“Where is Frances?”

“James drove her and Danjo out to Lake Pinchona. Frances loves to feed that alligator!”

“Frances is gone fall in one day and get eaten up,” Mary-Love said calmly, as she mounted the stairs.

Elinor went into the kitchen and said to Zaddie, “You go upstairs and see if Miss Mary-Love needs any help. She’s going to want to undo everything I’ve already done. I’m going to fix her some nectar.” She took out the ice pick and began to chop ice.

. . .

“I *wish* Frances had some prettier things,” said Mary-Love. She had gone through Frances’s luggage, clucking disapproval of what had been packed, how Elinor had packed it, and even of the two small suitcases themselves. Now she was seated on the glider on the sleeping-porch and sipping her blackberry nectar. Elinor rocked gently in the swing and was thoughtfully stirring the overpoweringly sweet nectar that had been diluted with water and ice. “I wish you and Oscar would *let* me buy Frances some things,” Mary-Love continued. “You two don’t even let me see my grandchild anymore.”

“Miss Mary-Love,” said Elinor calmly, “that’s just not so. Frances loves you to death—Frances loves everybody—but you won’t let that child near you.”

“Elinor! How could you say such a thing!”

“I can say it because it’s perfectly true. Oscar and I don’t spend much time at your house and you don’t spend much time over here either, but we have never tried to discourage Frances from going over to see you. You’re her grandmother, but you don’t ever want to have anything to do with her. You and Miriam treat Frances as if she were dirt under your feet. She lay in that room sick as she could be for three years, and not once did you visit her. I was embarrassed to mention it when anybody asked me about it. It’s hard for me to believe that you could be so deliberately cruel to your own granddaughter.”

There was no rancor in Elinor’s voice. She spoke as if she stated obvious truths. The very baldness of Elinor’s assertions wounded Mary-Love, who never looked at a thing directly, and now had no idea how to confront her daughter-in-law’s unexpected forthrightness.

“Elinor! I am shocked. Aren’t we taking Frances with us to Chicago tomorrow? Won’t she and Miriam have the time of their lives?”

“Maybe,” said Elinor. “That is, if Miriam will speak to Frances—and I’m not convinced that she will.”

Mary-Love was growing even less certain how to respond to her daughter-in-law. Elinor’s remarks had the substance but not the feel of an

attack. Mary-Love temporized by glancing around the porch and commenting idly, “It’s been so long since I’ve been here.”

“That’s your fault, Miss Mary-Love,” said Elinor, cannily returning to the subject. “Oscar and I would never have turned you away if you had knocked on the door.”

“I didn’t feel welcome,” said Mary-Love, abashed that her innocent-sounding tactic of delay had so quickly been turned against her. “This isn’t my house anymore, you know.”

Elinor didn’t reply. Her smile was vague.

“You know,” Mary-Love went on, “one day I sent Luvadia Sapp over here with the deed to this house. I signed it over to you and Oscar. Did that girl bring it, or did she lose it somewhere on the way?”

“Oh, she brought it. We’ve got the deed inside somewhere.”

“I was expecting a thank you, I must say.”

“Miss Mary-Love, Oscar and I bought this house.”

“I *gave* it to you!”

“No, you’re wrong,” Elinor said with ostensible amiability. “It was *supposed* to have been our wedding present. But then we had to pay for it. We had to give you Miriam for it. Miriam was eight years old before you finally turned over the deed. That kind of delay doesn’t deserve a thank you.”

Elinor’s voice and tone continued soft and conversational, but Mary-Love was certain now that this attack had been long in the planning. She was little prepared to do battle when all her thought for months had been devoted to tomorrow’s journey!

“I don’t know why I’m sitting here listening to this,” Mary-Love cried. “You’re so hard! No wonder Frances is the way she is! No wonder Miriam doesn’t want to play with her!”

“Frances, in case you hadn’t noticed, is a thoroughly sweet child. She loves everybody, and everybody loves her. I wish I could say the same for Miriam. The way that child acts, I’m glad she lives with you and not with me.”

“Miriam is worth ten of Frances!”

“You may think that, but it’s still no excuse for you to treat Frances the way you do,” said Elinor, remaining aggravatingly cool.

Mary-Love, in danger of becoming agitated, sought to turn the attack. “Elinor, why do you treat *me* the way you do?”

Elinor appeared to consider for a moment, and then replied: “Because of the way you treat Oscar. The way you treat your whole family, the way you’ve always treated them.”

“I love every one of them! I love them to death! All I want in the world is for my family to love me.”

“I know,” said Elinor. “And you don’t want them to love anyone else. You want to provide everybody with everything. You didn’t want Oscar to marry me because you didn’t want him to divide his love. The same with poor old Sister. You took Miriam away from us—”

“You let her go!”

“—and you raised her so that she loved you, and didn’t give a single solitary thought to her own parents. I remember when Grace was little and was close to Zaddie, you tried to break that up, too.”

“I don’t remember anything of the sort!”

“You did it, though. Miss Mary-Love, it’s the kind of thing you do without thinking. It comes natural to you. If you had had your way, James would have thrown Queenie Strickland and her children out of town the day they showed up.”

“Queenie was no good—”

“You told James he was making a big mistake in taking in Danjo, but Danjo has made James very happy.”

“One day that boy is going to turn—”

Elinor again paid no attention to Mary-Love. “And when the bank called in Oscar’s loan, you wouldn’t lend him the money to save him from bankruptcy. You *wanted* to see Oscar and me go under. You wanted us poor so that we would have to come begging.”

“Oscar didn’t go under. James lent him the money,” Mary-Love protested.

“Oscar has never forgiven you. I don’t imagine he ever will.”

“You haven’t either, have you, Elinor?”

“Miss Mary-Love, you don’t like me because I took Oscar away from you. You haven’t liked me since the day I showed up in Perdido. It can’t make a whole lot of difference to you whether I forgive you or not.”

“You’re right,” said Mary-Love, suddenly frank, almost without knowing it, letting her anger show and speaking her mind, “it doesn’t. I’ve never expected anything from you except bitterness and reproach, Elinor.

And it's all I've ever gotten. And this, I suppose, is your fond farewell with everybody about to go off to Chicago for a good time."

"Yes," replied Elinor, unperturbed. "Though you're not there yet."

"You've been biding your time, haven't you? You've been treasuring up your hostility, isn't that right? You've been storing it up for five years, ever since Oscar asked me to lend him money he didn't even need!"

"I have been waiting..." Elinor admitted.

"I *wondered* when you were going to show your hand," snapped Mary-Love. "Since you showed up in this town during the flood, lounging in the Osceola and waiting for my boy to come along and rescue you and court you and marry you. Lying in wait for him like a lizard waiting for a green-bottle fly! And you got him. I couldn't stop you. But I *did* stop you from getting anything else, didn't I? For all your running-around, and all your little schemes and plans and biting, you've ended up with nothing at all."

"Nothing?" echoed Elinor.

"Nothing. What have you got? You've got this house, because I gave it to you. You've got a drawerful of promissory notes to James, and he's the only man in the world who would lend money to Oscar, who never had anything I didn't give him and never will. You've got a deed to a little land that's scattered around here and there, but it's all flood land and there aren't any roads on any of it and Tom DeBordenave when he owned it never made a crying dime off it. And you've got a little girl, but she's a puny thing, and nothing at all compared to the one you gave away fifteen years ago. You've got a few friends in town, but they're the ones you stole from me. They're the ones I didn't want anymore. And you've got a husband who will insist on living next door to his mother forever. That's what you've got, Elinor, and let me tell you, it isn't much. Not by my standards."

"It seems to me," said Elinor, "that you've showed your hand too."

"No! I'm not the one who's fighting. I'm not the one who's always playing games. Because I'm on top. You try to blame me for beating you out of what's rightfully yours, but nobody beat you out, Elinor. You just didn't have the courage to go out and get what you wanted."

"I've held back," Elinor returned.

Mary-Love laughed derisively. "I'd like to see you try to do something, Elinor. Just what do you think you *could* do, to get back at me for all the things you think I've done? What paltry little thing will you do now?"

“Miss Mary-Love, despite you and despite everything you’ve tried to do to keep Oscar down, I intend to make him rich. I intend to make him richer than you ever dreamed of being—that’s what I intend to do.”

Again Mary-Love laughed. “And how do you intend to do that? The last time you convinced him to do something, all he did was get himself in debt, and he’s never gotten out of it. Are you gone persuade him to buy more land?”

“Yes. Henry Turk is going to sell his land—that’s all the poor man’s got left. He’s got a tract of about fifty thousand acres in Escambia County. He came to see Oscar about it the other day.”

“How much does he want for it?”

“Twenty dollars an acre.”

“That’s a hundred thousand dollars! Where’s Oscar gone get that money?”

Elinor smiled. “I thought I’d take this opportunity to ask you to lend it to him.”

Mary-Love’s jaw dropped in her amazement. “Elinor, you are asking me to lend you one hundred thousand dollars so Oscar can buy a lot of worthless land?”

“It’s not worthless. It’s covered with pine.”

“Lord God, what do we need more pine for? There’s nobody buying it, Elinor. Or hadn’t you heard there’s a Depression going on.”

“We ought to have that land, Miss Mary-Love. Will you lend us the money?”

“No! Of course I’m not gone lend you the money! You’d like to drive me to the poor house, is what you’d like to do, Elinor. Well, I’m not gone be driven anywhere, I’m not lending Oscar one penny. What has he been able to do with that land he bought from Tom DeBordenave? He hasn’t even been able to keep up bank payments on it.”

“Then your answer is no?”

“Of course it’s no! Did you actually expect me to say yes?”

“No,” admitted Elinor. “I just wanted to give you one more chance.”

“One more chance for *what?”*

To this Elinor made no reply. She drank off the last of her nectar and put the glass on the table at the side of the swing.

“Miss Mary-Love,” she replied, still unmoved, “think whatever you like about me. All I’ve said today is that I know what you’re up to. I’ve

always known. And when the time comes when you have the leisure to think things over, just remember that I gave you one last chance."

Mary-Love stood up from the glider and straightened her dress. "I'll tell you another thing, Elinor..."

"What?"

"You make the worst nectar I've ever had in my life. It tastes like you made it with water straight out of that stinking old river. The only reason I drank more than one sip was out of pure politeness."

. . .

The next morning a caravan of automobiles, filled with people and luggage, headed for the train station in Atmore. Florida Benquith drove Queenie, Queenie's children, and Ivey; Bray drove Mary-Love, Sister, and Miriam; and Oscar drove James, Danjo, and Frances. Everyone was jammed together and anxious to be off. Sister carried sheaves of tickets in her pocketbook. She had taken the responsibility of managing all the logistics of the excursion.

At the train station the Caskeys and all their luggage were lined up on the platform, waiting for the Hummingbird, which would take them as far as Montgomery. There they would change trains and be on their way directly to Chicago.

Mary-Love attempted to wheedle out of her son some small expression of affection: "Are you gone miss us?"

"You're taking away half the town, Mama."

"Say goodbye to me, Oscar!"

"Have a good time, Mama," said Oscar, perfunctorily kissing her on the cheek. She had not dared hope for more. She turned to thank Florida Benquith for her assistance, when she suddenly grew dizzy and grasped the back of a bench to keep from falling.

"Are you all right, Mary-Love?" asked Queenie.

Mary-Love looked up with an expression of pained surprise. "Suddenly I think I have got the worst headache I've ever had in all my life."

"Are you sick?" asked Miriam apprehensively. She had been looking forward to this trip, and wanted nothing to interfere with her pleasure in it.

"No, I've just got a headache. Sister, is everybody ready to go?"

"Yes, ma'am—"

Before Sister could continue, Mary-Love sank onto the bench and raised her hand to her rapidly paling face.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she gasped.

The adults gathered around her. Malcolm and Lucille stood to one side and drew on sullen faces in preparation for some great disappointment. Frances and Miriam looked toward their grandmother with some misgiving. She looked very ill.

Ivey moved forward and felt Mary-Love's forehead. Already her hair lay in damp waves over her prickled scalp.

"Miss Mary-Love, you hot?"

"Ivey," she whispered, "I'm just burning up!"

Ivey turned to the others and said, "She got a bad fever. She ought to be at home in bed right this very minute. Y'all back off some." She took a kerchief from her pocketbook and handed it to Miriam. "Go get this wet."

Miriam hurried off to the ladies' room. The rest of them talked in low voices, glancing at Mary-Love. Her head lolled on her shoulders as Ivey sat beside her, unbuttoning her blouse, and wiping the perspiration from her forehead.

"She's real sick," said Florida. As the wife of a doctor, her opinion carried some weight.

"I know," said James, "but will she be all right?"

"Once she gets home, probably," replied Florida. "Leo ought to look at her. I never saw anybody get so sick so fast."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, then Sister's teeth went *clack-clack* and she said, "All right, then, I'll say it."

"Say what?" asked James weakly.

"What are we gone do? Are we gone go back to Perdido and sit around for five more years before we ever get out of town again?"

"Mary-Love looks so bad!" said James.

"Florida and I will take care of Mama," said Oscar. "The rest of y'all ought to get on that train. We got to think of the children. They'll be so disappointed if y'all turned around now."

"I know," sighed James. "But it just doesn't seem right to leave like this."

"Probably she would *want* you all to go on and have a good time," suggested Florida. "I don't think she would want to ruin everything for everybody."

Sister laughed. “Florida, don’t you know Mama better than that? Nothing would make her well sooner than to know that we had canceled the entire trip because of her.”

“Sister!” cried James.

“Well, I’m sorry, but that’s the truth,” said Sister. “We have been planning this for months, and it’s the first real chance I’ve had to go anywhere or do anything since I got married. I don’t intend to give it all up just because Mama comes down with a summer cold.”

“It looks worse than that,” Queenie said. “But I agree with Sister, James. The children are excited—we’re *all* excited. The tickets are paid for, the hotel reservations have all been made. And what would we say in Perdido, that all ten of us turned right around and came back when we weren’t fifty miles out of town, just because Mary-Love came down with a little headache and temperature?”

“I suppose you’re right,” said James.

“Of course they’re right,” said Oscar energetically. “We’ll put Mama in the back seat of the Packard and have her home in bed before y’all get to Greenville. As soon as she’s well, we’ll pack her up and send her on to meet you.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Sister quickly. This seemed the solution that would do the least damage to their original plans, and she wanted to make it firm before James, in his charity to Mary-Love, could change anyone’s mind. “Somebody should go speak to the children and tell them what’s been decided.”

. . .

Mary-Love Caskey sat and moaned and sweated profusely on the hard wooden bench in the stifling Atmore station. She could not speak an articulate word. Beside her, Ivey Sapp mopped her brow, squeezed her hands, and whispered, “Miss Mary-Love, Miss Mary-Love, what you been eating? What you been drinking? D’you get hold of something that wasn’t good for you? You been drinking down some bad water?”

Chapter 39

The Closet Door Opens

Elinor was sitting on her front porch when Bray drove up. As if she had known that Mary-Love lay feverish across the back seat of the car, she stood up and walked out to the street and peered in. “Bray,” she said, “I’ve got the front room all ready for her.”

“Miss El’nor,” said Bray, puzzled, “did Mr. Oscar call you on the telephone to say we was coming?”

Elinor, appearing preoccupied, did not answer.

Oscar had driven up right behind Bray and had heard what his wife had said. “Elinor,” he said, “you sure you want this responsibility? I was thinking we maybe should put her in the hospital.”

“Did Ivey look at her?”

Bray nodded. “Ivey say she ought to be at home in her own bed.”

“That’s not the hospital,” Elinor pointed out. “Zaddie and I will take perfectly good care of her.”

Bray lifted Mary-Love out of the car and quickly carried her into Elinor’s house, up the stairs and down the corridor, placing her on the bed in the front room.

Elinor followed them in, calling Zaddie up.

“All of you go away, now,” said Elinor, closing the door of the room against them. “Zaddie and I are going to change her clothes and give her a sponge bath. She’ll be cooler and more comfortable then. Oscar, you better call Leo Benquith and get him over here.”

Everyone did as they were told. Dr. Benquith arrived to find Mary-Love looking very weak and very ill, propped up on pillows in the front room. She appeared now, however, to have some awareness of where she was. She was so little her old self that she did not even object to being placed in the care of her daughter-in-law. Elinor and Zaddie stood at the foot of the bed as Leo Benquith examined her.

“It’s a fever,” he said with a shrug. “Just what everybody said it was. And, Elinor, you did exactly the right thing. Miz Caskey,” he said, addressing Mary-Love—rather loudly, as if deafness were also her infirmity, “Elinor’s gone take good care of you till you get well.”

Mary-Love's eyes closed and she sighed heavily.

That evening at supper, Oscar said to Elinor, "You sure we shouldn't put Mama in the hospital?"

"You heard what Leo Benquith said," replied Elinor. "I know what to do—and Leo will drop by every afternoon. Miss Mary-Love would hate the hospital—all those strangers. And, Oscar, when they start calling from Chicago, you tell them she's doing just fine, but doesn't want to talk on the telephone. If they think she's still sick, they'll all pack up and head right back. Your Mama has this family trained."

"Don't you think people *should* be here?"

"I do not. I think they'd only disturb her. I'm going to shoo away all her visitors until she can get well. By the time they all get back, your mama will be up and complaining how they all left her high and dry. She's never going to let them hear the end of it."

. . .

Mary-Love was nursed by her daughter-in-law. Elinor sat with her in the front room all day long. All visitors were stopped at the door downstairs by an unbribable, unmovable Zaddie. Only Leo Benquith was allowed inside the house, and he came once a day, right after the noontime meal. He examined Mary-Love in Elinor's presence, went downstairs, and always accepted a glass of iced tea from Zaddie who was waiting for him with it. He sat out on the front porch and told Oscar what he thought.

What he thought was not very encouraging.

"Oscar," said Leo. "I don't know what's wrong with your mama. She has some sort of fever, and she cain't seem to get rid of it. She's gone have to lie real still up there for some time to come."

"Maybe we should take her to Pensacola to Sacred Heart..." Oscar suggested tentatively.

"Well," said Leo. "I wouldn't recommend it. I would let her keep to her bed. I would let Elinor stay right there by her all the time. Here she can have the food and drink that she's used to. That's what I would do."

"Leo, what is it she's *got*, anyway?"

"Like I said, it's some kind of fever. Like a swamp fever. Sort of like malaria—but of course it's not malaria. Honest to God, Oscar, I don't know what it is. Your mama been out fishing lately?"

"It's hard to imagine Mama fishing. Why you ask something like that?"

“’Cause I remember a long time ago an old colored man—don’t even remember his name—came down with the same thing, or same thing near as I can make out. He was one of Pa’s cases, I was just itty-bitty, but I remember, ’cause I was going around with Pa in those days. That old colored man was a fisherman, used to fish on the Perdido a few miles up above here, I guess.”

“That was before my time, ’cause I don’t remember him. But he had the same thing?”

“I think it was. Said he fell in the water, swallowed some, and nearly drowned. Came back home and crawled into bed.”

“Great God in the morning, Leo! If you could catch something out of Perdido water, don’t you think we’d all be dead by now? Elinor, especially. She swims in that old river all the time. Always has. And she hasn’t been sick a day since we were married in James’s living room. What happened to that old colored man anyway?”

“Oh, Oscar, that was so long ago! That old man’s been dead twenty-five years!”

“What’d he die of, though?” Leo Benquith looked closely at Oscar, but didn’t answer. “That old colored man died of the fever he caught in Perdido water, isn’t that right?” Oscar shook his head ruefully. “Leo, I’m sorry. It’s not that I don’t think you’re the best doctor in three counties, it’s just that lately Mama and I haven’t been getting along so well.”

“So Florida told me.”

“And if anything happened to her right now, I think I’d just die! Listen, Leo, you think if I went up there and apologized, Mama would hear me and understand what I was saying?”

“She might.”

“Would it be all right to do that?”

“As long as you don’t badger her into answering you, ’cause I’m not so sure she can. Oscar, I tell you what. You wait awhile, let her get over the excitement of my being here this afternoon, then go up and ask Elinor if it’s all right. She’ll know.”

“Elinor’s a good nurse for Mama!” Oscar exclaimed with pride.

“She sure is,” agreed Leo. “I think Elinor knows as much about Mary-Love’s illness as I do.”

Accordingly, an hour later, after he had drunk two more glasses of iced tea and walked around the house a couple of times and poked a stick into

the kudzu at the base of the levee looking for stray snakes and called for Zaddie to let him in the back way, Oscar went upstairs and knocked on the door of the front room.

Elinor opened the door softly and stepped out into the hallway.

"How's Mama?"

"She's the same."

"Elinor, can I speak to her?"

"About what?"

"About...things," he said vaguely and uneasily.

"Are you gone yell at her?"

"No, of course not! I'm gone ask her to forgive me."

"Forgive you for what?"

"For not coming to see her for the past five years."

"Oscar, that was Mary-Love's fault. That wasn't yours."

"I know, but I shouldn't have done it anyway. Mama's always been that way, and I knew it. Maybe if I said, 'Mama, will you forgive me?' it'd make her feel better. You think?"

Elinor paused and considered. At last she stood aside and said, "All right, Oscar. Go on in. But keep your voice down. And don't keep asking her to say yes and no and shake her head and kiss you."

"I won't. But will she hear me? Will she understand what I'm saying?"

"That I don't know. Oscar, I'm going to speak to Zaddie for a few minutes and then I'm coming right back up and throw you out. So you'd better get to it."

Elinor went quietly down the hallway toward the stairs as Oscar hesitantly entered the front room.

. . .

The room was dark and airless, though outside the sun shone brightly and a stiff breeze from the Gulf kept the afternoon heat at bay. Across the windows the shades had been pulled, the venetian blinds closed, and the lined draperies drawn. A thin line of dim light along the baseboard below the windows was the only indication that it was not black night outside. The room was overwhelmed with the unmistakable odor of illness, as if the sickness had infected the bedclothes, the furniture, and the very walls and floor of the room. On a table laden with medicines was an oscillating fan. Its labored turning was a result of mechanical difficulty, but it almost seemed to Oscar that its problems might have been caused by the density of

the air it had to reckon with. An extra carpet had been put down on the floor; cushions had been put on all the chairs, and cloths had been laid over every surface to guard against obtrusive noise. A single low-watted bulb shone dimly behind a shade of crimson silk. Oscar looked about and no longer wondered that his daughter had been afraid to sleep in this room. The walls were dark green, but they seemed no brighter than the black cast-iron chandelier suspended near the middle of the ceiling. He had rarely been in this room. With the door closed, the light shut out, and all outside sound muffled, it didn't seem like a part of the house at all.

In the same way, his mother, lying in the bed, seemed no longer a part of his life. She was not the woman who figured in his memory and thought. Mary-Love lay unmoving, breathing stertorously, in a thick linen nightdress, propped up on pillows. The sheets, spread, and coverlet had been impeccably arranged; they covered Mary-Love almost up to her neck. Her hands, white and frail, lay atop the folded-back sheet.

Mary-Love's eyes were open, but they were not focused on her son. Experimentally, he moved a few feet to the left. Her eyes did not follow him. Oscar placed himself in her line of vision.

"Mama?" he said.

He listened and wondered if he did not detect a slight momentary alteration of her breath. It was difficult to tell over the distracting noise of the fan.

"Mama, I came to visit you for a minute."

He moved to the table and turned the fan off. For the first time he detected the unsettling raspiness in his mother's breathing.

Back at bedside, he assured her, "I'll turn it back on in a minute. I just wanted to make sure you heard what I was going to say."

He paused, waiting for some indication that she had heard, or that she assented to his continuing. None came, but Oscar felt that he had to proceed.

"Mama, I'm real sorry you're sick. The only good thing about your being sick is that you're letting Elinor and me take care of you. You know what that shows, don't you? It shows nobody's upset anymore. Elinor wouldn't do everything she's doing for you if she were still mad at you, would she? She wouldn't spend all day up here every day. She wouldn't sleep in here at night. Mama, I just want you to know that I'm not mad anymore either. I'm not even thinking about the things that made me mad. I

just want you to get well. By the time everybody comes back from Chicago, I want you back in your own house, fussing. I want you to get mad because everybody went away and left you here by yourself. But I tell you something, I'm glad they did, because it means Elinor and I have got the chance to prove how much we really do love you. That's what I wanted to make sure you heard me say. Just because I'm not being your nurse doesn't mean I don't care, because I do. I just wouldn't know what to do in here. See, I cain't even look at you and make sure you're hearing what I'm saying. I wouldn't know what medicine was what, and that's why Elinor is doing all this and not me. Elinor is being better than I thought she could be, Mama. Now, doesn't it make you want to cry that you two have not been getting along all these years? You know what? Elinor and I have been married sixteen years now, isn't that something? I remember the first time __"

At that moment, Elinor opened the door of the room, and said, "Oscar, that's enough for right now. It's time for your mama's medicine. Turn the fan back on."

He did so. "Do you think she heard me?" he asked. "I said some things I wanted to make sure she heard."

Elinor turned her gaze to the woman in the bed. "I'm sure she heard every word." From a tray beside the fan, she took up a bottle of reddish liquid, unscrewed the cap, and poured out a dose into an old silver soupspoon.

"Can you tell for sure?" he persisted anxiously.

"Yes. Oscar, it's time you got back to the mill. You can speak to Mary-Love later." She went around the bed with the medicine.

"Is that Leo's prescription?"

With one hand she pressed Mary-Love's cheeks sharply together, so that her mouth involuntarily opened. Oscar watched as Elinor poured the liquid in, then rapped upward on Mary-Love's chin so that her mouth clapped shut with a clack of teeth.

"No," replied Elinor, standing up straight, "this is mine."

Oscar stood at the door and opened it softly. "Elinor, I'll be back at five." He looked once more at his mother in the bed. Mary-Love's eyes now seemed to stare back at him. In them Oscar saw what he thought was fear. "Mama," he said, "Elinor's gone take good care of you."

He slipped out and closed the door quickly behind him. He did not see his mother's lips struggle to form three syllables.

"Per-di-do," Mary-Love whispered.

Elinor looked at her mother-in-law and turned the fan on high. Mary-Love's rasping breath could not be heard.

Elinor sat down in the rocker at the foot of the bed and opened a magazine on her lap.

Mary-Love's fingers weakly twisted the hem of the sheet. Her moving lips formed the words, "I'm drowning..."

. . .

Feebleness, inconsequence, immobility, dependence—things Mary-Love Caskey had never known before had suddenly crowded in upon her. She remembered getting sick in the Atmore station, and she remembered when she first opened her eyes in the front room. She knew where she was from the hand-painted flowers on the footboard of the bed; she had picked the suite out in Mobile. It was the first furniture she had purchased for her son's house.

Her limbs were without sensation and very cold at the same time. Her head burned. She seemed always to be waking up, though she never had to open her eyes. She could never remember falling asleep. She wished she could dream. As it was, nothing held her mind but her cold limbs, her burning brow, and the profile of Elinor Caskey, rocking in a chair at the foot of the bed. Zaddie appeared sometimes, and the young black woman's voice seemed distant as she spoke to Elinor. It was as if Mary-Love heard it from the house next door, as if it were a voice caught in her sleep.

Elinor's voice, in contrast, always sounded close and clear, as if the words had been whispered directly into Mary-Love's ear in the dark.

She was never hungry, and she never remembered having eaten anything. The only thing she remembered was Elinor's fingers pressing her cheeks, so that the red liquid from the unmarked medicine bottle could be poured between her opened lips. Hours later, she'd feel the grit it left behind, pressing against her gums and her teeth. She wondered at Leo Benquith's prescribing it. Afterward, she always felt worse and weaker.

As the days progressed—Mary-Love supposed they were days, but reckoned them only by the difference in outfits Zaddie wore when she came into the room with the trays bearing Elinor's meals—Mary-Love lost more and more sensation in her body. Her limbs were no longer cold, but the

sheets, the spread, and the coverlet were leaden upon her. Her hands rested free, but the very air of the room seemed weighted; it seemed to press down against her until she could not move at all. She felt the perspiration that gathered upon her brow, which sometimes dripped into her eyes and stung. She welcomed that sting, for it was the only sensation left to her.

Otherwise, she was overwhelmed with the sense that she was filling up with liquid, as if her body were only some stretching skin into which day by day Elinor poured that noxious red liquid. It wasn't sweet, but it reminded her of the blackberry nectar she had been served the day before she fell ill. Her legs and belly were already so heavy that they seemed to sink deep into the bed. She was certain that she would never be able to move them again. A soupspoon of that medicine seemed to fill her body with gallons of liquid! She grew heavier and heavier. It was filling her lungs, leaving little room for her to bring in air. Her breath grew shallow and quick, and she felt that she was beginning to drown. Her brain held an involuntary image of floating slowly down the Perdido, her body lying just below the surface, with only her mouth, eyes, and nose protruding into the air. The rest of her was submerged in the river. If she struggled, she would certainly drown in that dry, airless front bedroom of Oscar's house. Even if the draperies were drawn back, the venetian blinds opened, and the shades lifted, Mary-Love would have seen only the levee, not the Perdido behind it, the Perdido daily spooned between her lips by her daughter-in-law.

Mary-Love was certain that that unmarked bottle held Perdido water. She now recognized the taste. She knew the texture of the red clay granules that were left behind on her tongue when she swallowed. She could smell it whenever the bottle was unscrewed. Yet she couldn't prevent her lips from parting when Elinor squeezed her cheeks, and couldn't help but swallow when Elinor jarred her mouth shut again.

Elinor was tireless. Elinor never left her.

Mary-Love prayed to be alone; she prayed to die in peace. She prayed to be able to sleep dreamlessly forever. She prayed for some death other than that which her daughter-in-law was preparing for her. When she realized that none of these prayers was to be answered, she beseeched God only that her doom not be prolonged.

Elinor sat at the foot of Mary-Love's bed and rocked. She leafed quietly through stacks of magazines and took trays from Zaddie at the door.

She stood by reporting to Leo Benquith, and when he was gone, she poured whole currents of Perdido river water down her mother-in-law's throat.

. . .

Only once did Mary-Love Caskey come to consciousness and find her daughter-in-law absent from the room. Her eyes, as usual, were already open. The sense of waking had not come to her, only the realization that previously she had been asleep. She hadn't the power to move her eyes in their sockets. She could only stare directly before her. Elinor was not in her chair. By some subtle means she couldn't precisely figure out, Mary-Love knew that Elinor was not in the room—and she also knew that it was night.

She drew an extra breath—a tiny sniff that wouldn't have been noticed even by someone leaning over her—in order to feel to what extent her lungs had filled with water.

Mary-Love's heart contracted. She had only an inch of space remaining in her lungs. Only an inch of breath to sustain her. She was heavy, filled with Perdido water, and the water was rising.

Lungs don't work that way, some voice belonging to the old Mary-Love told her sternly. Bodies don't fill with water like cauterized skins. Women don't drown in their beds.

Mary-Love didn't want to panic. If she panicked, she'd gasp for breath. If she gasped for breath, the water would move and slosh, and she'd die sputtering. She hadn't any hope except to cling to life. She wanted to stave off that doom for which she had so recently prayed.

She continued by force only to breathe her shallow, almost imperceptible breaths.

The front room darkened, as if she had closed her eyes, yet Mary-Love knew her eyes were open. She could not know how long it remained so. She felt, however, that she never lost consciousness.

Light came suddenly, but it wasn't morning light. It wasn't lamplight. It wasn't light from the opened door to the corridor. It was merely a pale bluish-white glow, outlining the closet door to the right of the fireplace.

Mary-Love made an effort to focus her eyes upon it. That was as much as she could do.

The closet door was slowly opening.

A little boy stood inside, and he was looking about himself in apparent confusion. Like Mary-Love, he also seemed not to have awakened, but to have found himself in a state of consciousness that had not existed before.

He lifted his hand before his face and stared at it. He peered cautiously out into the darkened room. Though Mary-Love thought that she knew him, she could not think clearly enough to identify him. Was he one of hers? Was he Queenie's boy?

The child stepped out of the closet and into the room. The bluish-white light faded behind him. The room was dark again.

Though the fan was off, Mary-Love heard nothing but her own shallow breathing.

Now that she could no longer see him, the boy's name came to her suddenly. *John Robert DeBordenave.*

More than his name came into her memory.

John Robert had disappeared twelve years before. He had drowned in the Perdido during the final stage of the levee construction, but now appearing so briefly in the light of the opened closet door, he was no older than on the last day that Mary-Love had seen him.

Has Elinor kept that boy locked up in there?

She heard a stray footfall then, though it was infinitely soft against the carpet.

Propped on her pillows, hands clasped neatly outside the regimented covers, Mary-Love might have been arranged for a visit from five governors and a member of the Cabinet. In the darkness, she could see nothing.

Then, there was a tug on the sheet, the hem of which was folded beneath her hands. Powerless to resist, her hands slipped apart.

Mary-Love saw nothing, but by a creak of springs, and a shifting of the mattress, she knew that John Robert DeBordenave was crawling beside her into the bed.

Chapter 40

The Wreath

The Caskeys had a wonderful time in Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans. The adults were as full of wonder and enjoyed themselves as much as the children. Only Miriam seemed out of sorts. She missed her grandmother sorely, or rather she missed her grandmother's never-yielding championship of her superiority to other children. Without Mary-Love, Miriam was just another little girl, with no special privileges above those accorded to Frances and Queenie's children.

Every day, James telephoned Oscar to ask how Mary-Love was getting along. Every day, Oscar said that she was improving, though still unable to write, still unwilling to get out of bed and come to the telephone. He did not say that there was a stack of postcards from Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans sitting on the hall table downstairs, unadmired and unread. He did not say that since James had left, Mary-Love Caskey had not spoken a single intelligible word to him, or evinced the slightest interest or curiosity about anything whatsoever, and that the front room, which had first smelled of sickness, had now begun to smell of something stronger.

James Caskey may have heard some of this in Oscar's tone and in Oscar's evasions. But no one else in the party suspected anything except that Mary-Love would be dreadfully angry with them all when they got home. On the last leg of the journey, the five-hour ride from New Orleans to Atmore, they all sat quietly in their compartments. Most of the talk was of facing Mary-Love on their return. The consensus was that Mary-Love would never forgive them for leaving her at home and going off and having a good time on their own.

"Lord," sighed James, "I know she's gone come down hard. That's why we haven't heard a single word from her. She's saving up."

"She's gone say," said Sister, "I got well in two days flat, but y'all wouldn't wait, y'all just went on without me."

"She's gone say," said Queenie, "I paid for this trip, and I want y'all to know that I didn't get one moment's pleasure out of it. Don't anybody ever ask me again, 'Miss Mary-Love, can we go somewhere?' 'cause I'm not paying for anybody to go anywhere ever again!"

They laughed at the predictability of her reaction at the same time that they dreaded her displeasure.

A few miles before the termination of the journey, the weary party began to gather in the train's narrow corridor. They would have very little time to get off the train, and the group was loaded down with what they had taken with them as well as what they had picked up along the way. All the Caskeys stood in a long line with Ivey foremost, and James and Sister in the rear. Queenie and the children were in the middle. Everyone stared out the window, watching for the first exciting glimpse of a familiar landmark or person.

As the train began to slow, the children grew restive until Danjo pointed and cried out, "I see Bray!"

"There's Miz Benquith!" cried Lucille.

"Daddy!" whispered Frances.

At the very end of the line, Sister peered through the open door of the compartment and out the window on the opposite side of the car. In the parking lot of the station she saw Oscar's automobile, Florida Benquith's car, and the Packard. Wired to the grille of the Packard was a black wreath.

As the train pulled into the station the children covered their ears at the shrill whistle.

But it wasn't a whistle, it was Sister's high-pitched wail of anguish, rising behind them, pushing them all out of the corridor, down the metal steps, and into the burning Alabama sun. As they stood bewildered on the platform before the station with Sister still wailing behind them, Bray and Oscar stepped forward with bands of mourning crape around their arms.

. . .

A black wreath had been hung on the door of each of the Caskey houses and over the gate of the Caskey mill. Mary-Love lay in a great white wicker casket, which resembled nothing so much as an oversized bassinet lined with a cushion of deep purple satin.

After Elinor had discovered the body the previous morning, Mary-Love had been taken away by the undertaker and brought back in only a few hours, clad in the dress she had worn the previous Easter. The furniture had been moved around in Elinor's front parlor and the casket placed beneath the stained-glass windows. In the colored light, the undertaker explained, the unavoidable alterations in skin color would be less noticeable. Mounds of lilies and heavily scented gardenias in tubs covered

with gold foil surrounded the casket. They masked the disagreeable odor of corruption, which came quickly to the dead in an Alabama July.

When Bray and Oscar and Florida Benquith had gone off to fetch the unsuspecting Caskeys from the Atmore station, the casual Perdido mourners were quietly ushered out of the house by Elinor, and the wreath was temporarily removed from the door to discourage others. Elinor sat in the parlor, quietly leafing through magazines, just as she had done when Mary-Love had lain, dying, in the room directly above this; Zaddie and Roxie were in the kitchen preparing food. A great deal of food had been brought by the townspeople, for nothing—everyone knew—makes one hungrier than grief.

At last Elinor heard the approach of the three automobiles. She went out onto the porch and stood silently.

Frances jumped out of the first car, and, weeping bitterly, ran toward her mother.

All the others emerged more slowly. They struggled with luggage and packages, talked in low voices, and wouldn't look at the house. No one seemed to know what to do first.

"Leave your things there," said Elinor in a low voice heard by everyone. "And come inside."

The family trooped silently onto the porch. Florida Benquith, having done her part, drove slowly away, as quietly as possible.

"Where'd you put her, Elinor?" asked James.

"In the front parlor."

Zaddie stood just inside the screen door. She pulled it open and stood back, nodding to everyone who came in. She spoke in a low voice. "How you, Miss Queenie? Hey, Danjo, you have a good time at Chicken-in-the-car-and-the-car-won't-go-Chicago?"

At last, only Elinor and her estranged daughter Miriam were left on the porch. The sixteen-year-old looked up at her mother, and said, "Why is Grandmama over here?"

"Because we couldn't leave her next door. There was no one to sit up with her. There was no one to receive visitors. And because she died in this house."

"She hated it over here," remarked Miriam as she went inside to survey the remains of her dead grandmother.

“She never looked prettier,” was the general comment, but the actual thought was that Mary-Love had never looked worse. Her face was wasted, drawn tight over the bones in some places, slack in others. Her folded hands seemed twisted in frustration. She looked anything but sleeping, anything but natural.

“Can she hear us?” Danjo whispered. James shook his head.

Miriam stood at the end of the coffin and peered into it for half a minute or so. Her eyes were dry. “Where are her rings?” she asked at last.

. . .

That night, Sister sat up with the body, joined in the first part of the night by James, then later by Oscar. In that room, under those circumstances, the Caskeys seemed all at once to have grown old. It had been a long time since any important member of the family had died. James and Mary-Love had been of an exact age, and James’s sixty-six years now made him appear an old man—to his family as well as to himself. Oscar was forty-one, and in the presence of his mother’s corpse, he looked every year of it. Sister was three years older, and that difference now appeared even greater. In the darkest hours, the brother and sister sat on the couch that faced the casket and talked about everything in the world but their mother. At last, as dawn approached and the first light glowed in through the panes of the colored glass over the casket, Sister said, “She wasn’t old. Sixty-six isn’t old.”

“She was very sick. Sister, you didn’t see her in that room up there.”

“What was *wrong* with her?”

“We don’t know. After Bray and I brought her back here from Atmore, she didn’t speak a single word to anybody. And she wasn’t left alone for a minute.”

“She must have been,” Sister pointed out. “Nobody was with her when she died.”

“Elinor went downstairs for two seconds, and when she came back, Mama was gone.”

“As long as there wasn’t any pain...”

“Sister, I wish I could say for sure that there wasn’t but I don’t know. Maybe I’m just not used to being around the mortally ill, but I never saw anything like it.”

“Like what?”

“Like what happened in that front room up there.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“Nothing happened. That’s what I mean. She was in that room all the while you were gone. She didn’t move, she didn’t speak, she didn’t close her eyes. Either Elinor or Zaddie was with her all the time. Elinor slept on a rollaway at the foot of the bed. I just don’t know whether Mama was in pain or not. All I know is that Elinor took care of her like she was her own mama, and had loved her every day of her life. If Mama had lived, I suppose they would have gone back to their old ways, but while Mama was sick, Elinor was always there. That must have made Mama feel good, if she knew it...”

“I’m not so sure about that, Oscar.”

As the sun rose over the pecan orchard opposite the house, the stained-glass windows were suddenly flooded with bright light. The wicker casket sprang to prominence before them, and Mary-Love’s ringless fingers were stained a bright blue.

Visitors began arriving at seven-thirty that morning for a last respectful view of the corpse. An endless round of breakfasts and an inexhaustible supply of coffee were set in the dining room by Zaddie, Ivey, and Roxie.

The funeral service was held in the parlor with only the family present. Early Haskew had been alerted the morning of Mary-Love’s death, and he arrived with only an hour to spare. Grace couldn’t be found because she was off on some sort of expedition to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with her friend who taught English literature.

While the funeral in the parlor was private, the service at the cemetery was open, and almost the entire town showed up. The mill had been closed for the day, and all the workers wandered about at a distance among the other graves, reading epitaphs aloud, toeing rocks out of the sandy earth, and slapping their thighs with the brims of their hats. Mary-Love’s coffin was lowered into the earth next to Genevieve’s. James, Sister, and Queenie wept.

. . .

After the graveside service, all the citizens of Perdido seemed to disperse themselves for the remainder of the afternoon. Little business was done. The Caskeys retired to their separate houses and grieved alone.

Elinor and Oscar had a houseful of food. Zaddie and Bray made a number of trips that quiet afternoon, delivering casseroles and hams and messes of peas and the like to the other Caskeys, who for certain didn’t yet feel like cooking anything.

Elinor, Oscar, and Frances sat on the porch upstairs. The day had turned even hotter than usual, and unpleasantly damp. Even the kudzu on the levee appeared to wilt beneath the atmospheric oppression. The creaking chains of the swing seemed muted, and downstairs Zaddie was working barefoot.

"Are you sad?" Oscar asked his daughter.

Frances nodded. She sat on the swing beside her mother, holding Elinor's hand.

"It was a shock, wasn't it?"

Frances nodded again.

"Elinor," remarked Oscar, "Sister asked me this morning why we didn't tell them all to come home when Mary-Love was so sick."

"You know why we didn't, Oscar."

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't have done any good to have everybody here. In fact, it would have done your mama harm. All those people traipsing in and out all day. She would never have gotten a minute's rest."

"But she died anyway," Frances pointed out. "And nobody got to see her."

"Frances is right," said her father. "When everybody got back, there was Mama in her casket. I don't blame them for feeling as bad as they do. James said it's horrible to think that while they were all having such a good time in Chicago and St. Louis and New Orleans, Mama was lying in the front room, suffering and dying, and they didn't know a thing about it."

"Oscar, that's the point. Even if they had known anything, they couldn't have helped."

"Mama would have wanted everybody at home."

"Yes!" said Frances.

"Well," said Elinor, "your mama wasn't running the show. I was."

Oscar said nothing more, but continued to fan himself diligently with a paper fan bearing an advertisement for the undertaker. After a bit he stood up, went over to the edge of the porch and looked out at his mother's house. He turned, appeared about to say something, then changed his mind and remarked suddenly, "Did you notice that Early was chewing tobacco?"

"At the funeral?"

"Yes!" cried Frances. "Miriam saw him spit into a camellia bush, and after that she wouldn't speak to him. She said he was too country for

words."

"How long do you suppose Early's gone stay around?" asked Oscar.

"How should I know?" Elinor said.

"You might have spoken to him."

"Well, I didn't," said Elinor. "What difference does it make?"

"Because Sister will probably go back with him, that's why."

"And?"

"And then what becomes of Miriam?"

"Miriam," said Elinor definitely, "comes home to us."

"Home?" echoed Oscar. "Miriam's never lived here. I don't imagined she's stepped foot in this house more than six times in her entire life."

"You think she really might move over here?" asked Frances with suppressed excitement.

"Where else would she go?" returned Elinor. "In a day or so I'll send Zaddie over to pack up her clothes."

"Mama," said Frances hesitantly, "are you gone give Miriam my room?"

"Of course not! We'll put Miriam in the front room."

"She cain't sleep in there!" cried Oscar.

"Why not?"

"Mama died in there! Mama died in that bed!"

"Well, Oscar, that's not going to hurt Miriam. Miss Mary-Love herself slept for twenty years in that bed your daddy died in. In fact, she probably slept in it the very night your daddy died, didn't she?"

Oscar nodded.

"I don't think Miriam will be scared," said Frances quietly. "If she is, she can sleep with me."

Elinor smiled at her daughter. "Aren't you a little old to be sharing your bed?"

"Was Miriam good to you on your trip?" Oscar asked.

"Yes, sir..." replied Frances slowly.

"Really and truly?" her mother prompted.

"Well, she was a little short with me now and then, but I didn't care. She was probably just worried about Grandmama."

Oscar and Elinor exchanged glances.

"Miriam," said Oscar, "may need a little talking to."

"Miriam wants to know where Grandmama's rings are, Mama."

“She said something about that to you?”

“At the funeral.”

“What did she say?”

Frances hesitated.

“Frances, what did Miriam say about the rings?”

“She said they were hers and that you stole them. She said Grandmama gave them to her for her safety-deposit box in Mobile.”

Elinor said nothing, but her expression was hard.

“Elinor, Miriam’s bound to be upset. You know how she loved Mama. Lord, she lived with Mama all her life, she—”

“It’s all right, Oscar. I’m not upset. One way or another, Miriam and I will be able to work things out.”

Chapter 41

Mary-Love's Heir

With Mary-Love dead, the complexion of the Caskey family was greatly altered. Mary-Love had been its head, its guiding force, its principal source of rebuke, and the measure by which all its achievements, delights, and unhappinesses were judged. She was gone, and the Caskeys looked uneasily about them to see who might move into the vacant position. James was eldest, but frail, retiring, and without a calling to leadership. Oscar was Mary-Love's male heir, but the Caskeys were used to a woman at the helm, and Oscar might well have to prove himself fit for such a place. Sister lived away; Grace was completely involved with her life at the Spartanburg girls' school. Queenie wasn't really a Caskey. The burden seemed to be poised above Elinor.

Because the Caskeys began to look upon her as the intuitive choice, they now sought reasons to make her the logical choice as well. She was wife to the man who ran the mill, source of all the Caskey power and prestige. She had status of her own in Perdido. She kept up the largest house in town. She had proved her worth by a willingness to do battle with Mary-Love. Who else had done that except when they had been driven to it in absolute desperation?

It was odd, but Elinor seemed to have changed in recent years. The change had been slower but no less radical than the transformation that James underwent on the day that Mary-Love had died. James Caskey had received more than an intimation of his own mortality: he had seen its very pattern in the wicker casket bathed in colored light. Frances's three-year illness seemed to have accomplished something similar with Elinor. Her single-minded and constant nursing of Frances had almost seemed to suggest that Elinor felt she was capable, alone, of curing her child. As those days of nursing had lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, Elinor's resolve to prove her healing prowess had grown. When Frances was finally well again, after three years of suffering, it had been impossible for anyone to say whether the cure had been effected by Elinor's baths, Dr. Benquith's medicine, or by some stray trigger accidentally pulled in Frances's system. Elinor seemed to have been humbled by her daughter's

bout with the crippling disease and by her own failure to cure it easily and quickly. During the course of Frances's illness, Elinor had not fought with her mother-in-law. Now that Mary-Love was dead, a chastened Elinor Caskey stood before the family, solemnly prepared to receive the Caskey crown.

The more they all thought of it, the clearer it became that Elinor was to be the new head of the family. There was no actual delegation to inform her of the choice, but there might as well have been. Her opinion was solicited on every matter great and small. Her decision was always acceded to without objection. Her house became the focus of family activity. The hub of the Caskey universe, with a little grinding of gears and spinning of wheels, slipped twenty yards to the west.

Though the Caskeys watched carefully, few alterations in management were apparent. In the first week of mourning for Mary-Love, there was little activity. The Caskeys kept to themselves. Early Haskew had come and gone, leaving behind his wife and tobacco-juice stains on the glossy leaves of Mary-Love's prized camellias. Miriam remained with Sister in Mary-Love's house.

"When are we gone go send for Miriam?" Oscar asked his wife.

"I don't want to uproot her yet," said Elinor. "She's attached to Sister, and when Sister goes back to Chattanooga, that'll be time enough."

"When is Sister planning on going back?"

"She's waiting for the reading of the will, I suppose. I don't know what else could keep her here."

There was some speculation among the Caskeys about the contents of Mary-Love's will. It was assumed in the town that Mary-Love would divide her substantial fortune between her two children, Oscar and Sister. Oscar would at last be rewarded for his many years of service to the mill; Sister would never have to worry about Early's ability to scratch work out of a depressed economy. Doubtless some special provision would be made for Miriam, for the child had been very dear to Mary-Love. Perdido could not imagine that the dead woman had done anything different.

The Caskeys, however, knew to what lengths Mary-Love would go to thwart happiness and dampen expectations. It was not inconceivable, for instance, that she would have left everything to James, who was old and didn't need it; or to Miriam, who was young and couldn't handle it. Elinor, in particular, was anxious for the will to be read. She wanted Oscar to get

the money as quickly as possible so that he would be able to purchase Henry Turk's final tract of land. She was fearful another buyer might step forward in the interim. "Just go to Henry, Oscar, and tell him not to sell it to anybody else. Tell him we'll buy it up just as soon as Mary-Love's will is read."

"Elinor, we've just got to wait. We're not sure yet who Mama left her money to. And even if I get half and Sister gets half, it's still gone be a while before the thing's probated. It's gone be six months at least before I see a single dime of Mama's money."

"Then borrow the money from James. We just *can't* let that Escambia County land get away from us."

"Why are you so all fired up to buy land in Florida? We've never seen fit to cross a state line before."

"That's good land over there, Oscar."

"It's just like it is over here, same old trees, same old creeks, same old Perdido River flowing alongside it. Only nobody lives there, and it's hard to get to. Henry Turk never made a crying dime off the land, and that's the reason he's still got it—nobody in his right mind wants that land. Henry was able to get rid of everything but that. And you know if we got it, we'd have to learn all about Florida laws and Florida taxes."

"You'll be sorry if we don't buy it up."

"Why?"

"I know that land," returned Elinor. "Someday it will make us more money than you ever dreamed of."

Oscar was mystified by this remark. As far as he knew, his wife had never crossed over into any part of Escambia County, Florida. How could she know anything of those empty quadrants of pine, ribbed with the creeks and branches that emptied into the lower Perdido?

. . .

The will was brief. Two thousand dollars went to Ivey Sapp and Bray Sugarwhite, to build themselves a new house on higher land than Baptist Bottom, and five hundred dollars went to Luvadia Sapp. Seven hundred dollars bought a new window for the Methodist Church attended by the family, and three hundred dollars bought a new baptismal font for the Methodist Church in Baptist Bottom. Ten thousand dollars to the Athenaeum Club established a scholarship for a deserving Perdido girl to attend the University of Alabama.

The Caskeys nodded approval of these small bequests. They showed, everyone thought, a sense of community responsibility in the dead woman.

The bulk of her fortune—her half of the Caskey sawmill and allied industries; the holdings of land and leasing rights; the stocks and bonds; the mortgages and liens upon other properties in Baldwin, Escambia, Monroe, and Washington counties; the savings accounts in the Perdido bank, three Mobile banks, and two Pensacola banks; and the investments in Louisiana and Arkansas—were to be divided equally between her beloved son Oscar and her devoted daughter Elvennia Haskew.

To her granddaughter, Miriam Caskey, Mary-Love left her house, its contents, and the land on which it stood; all her jewels, precious and semiprecious stones—mounted or loose; all silverware and objects of virtu; and the contents of four safe deposit boxes in various banks.

There was enormous relief in the family. Mary-Love had done what everyone thought to be right and proper. She had not sought to perpetuate her animadversions from the grave. The malice of her cloying love apparently had been dampened when she had contemplated her own death in the writing of her testament.

. . .

Miriam was sixteen, but she seemed grown-up. And she thought she had a reason to seem so. After all, she was an heiress in her own right. She had cases of jewels in her room, and she had safety-deposit boxes of diamonds and rubies and sapphires in four different banks in Mobile. She was no one's daughter. Mary-Love had died and left her as alone as if she had been abandoned in the midst of the pine forest. She didn't belong to her parents, for they had given her up when she was a baby. Despite their proximity during the intervening years, they remained little more than strangers. They were rather like cousins, once or twice removed, whom one didn't particularly care for, though they bore one's name and one's likeness. She wasn't Sister's either, though once she had been. Sister had gone off and married Early Haskew, whom Miriam deprecated for his coarse country ways and his chewing tobacco.

Sister and Miriam sat at the supper table together a few hours after the will was read. Sister had helped raise Miriam when she was a baby, but after Sister's marriage, Miriam had become Mary-Love's child alone. Sister and Miriam had not exactly become strangers, but there was now a certain distance between them.

“It’s funny,” said Miriam.

“What is?”

“To think that this whole house is mine now, and everything in it.”

“I’m glad Mama left it to you,” said Sister. “That way you can sell it and put some money in the bank. That’ll send you to school.”

“I don’t intend to sell it.”

Sister looked up, surprised. “You’re gone let it sit here empty? You shouldn’t, you know. Rats take up in empty houses. Squirrels will break in through the roof.”

“I’m gone live here,” said Miriam.

Sister was more surprised than ever. “You’re not coming back to Chattanooga with me?”

“I hate Chattanooga.”

“You’ve never even been there. What do you *think* you’d hate about it?”

“Everything.”

“That’s no answer.”

“Do you really want an answer, Sister?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“I wouldn’t be comfortable,” said Miriam.

“Comfortable?”

“Around Early.”

“You don’t like Early?”

“I’m not comfortable around him, that’s all. He’s too...country. I’m not used to being around country people.”

Sister flushed. “That school you go to is *filled* with boys and girls who are a lot more country than Early.”

“But I don’t have to live with them.”

Miriam and Sister then passed plates around for second helpings. Ivey came out of the kitchen and poured more iced tea.

“Ivey’s already said she would stay on with me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ivey to Sister. “I did say it.”

Sister shook her head. “What’s your mama gone say?”

“You mean Elinor?”

“Yes, of course I mean Elinor. If I go off back to Chattanooga and don’t take you with me, Elinor’s gone say that you got to move in with her and Oscar over there.”

“I wouldn’t move in with them if they threw a rope over my neck and *dragged* me across the yard.”

“Elinor might do it. Elinor wants you back. She’s spoken to me about it.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Sister, don’t try to take Miriam back to Chattanooga, because I want her over here with me.’”

“She can’t have me!”

“You’re her *daughter,* Miriam. That’s what it comes down to.”

They were silent for a while longer. Ivey cleared away and brought out dessert. It was Boston cream pie, Sister’s favorite.

“I don’t want to go to Chattanooga,” said Miriam to Ivey.

“No, I know you don’t,” said Ivey in mild confirmation.

“And I certainly don’t want to move in with Elinor and Oscar.”

“No, ma’am, I *know* you don’t want to do that.”

“I want to stay right in this house.”

“You love this house,” said Ivey with pride. “Miss Mary-Love wanted you to have it to live in.”

“Then what do I do? How do I get to stay on here?” Miriam looked to the black woman for an answer. Sister, as if she knew exactly what that answer was going to be, continued eating her pie.

“Miss Miriam, why don’t you ask Sister to stay on here with you?”

Miriam looked surprised. “But what about Early?”

“Mr. Early’s got his jobs here, there, everywhere,” said Ivey. “Sister, you want another piece of pie?”

“I sure do.”

“Sister,” said Miriam, “will you stay on here with me? Be my mama.”

Sister dug into the second piece of pie. “Let me think about it, Miriam. Let me put that idea under my pillow.”

. . .

Next morning at breakfast, the first thing Miriam said to Sister was: “Did you decide?”

“No, and I don’t want to be pestered about this, either. You have no right to ask me to leave Early just so you can do what you want.”

“Then you’re leaving?”

“Not yet.”

“When?”

“I said that I don’t want to be pestered about this.”

“When can I ask you again if you’ve made up your mind?”

“Never.”

“Then what do I say to Elinor when she comes over here and wants to carry me off?”

“I’ll deal with your mother, Miriam. Just stop asking me about it.”

Miriam said no more. And her evil day was postponed, because Sister did not return to Chattanooga. She remained in Perdido a week beyond the reading of the will, then two weeks, then a month. The girl lived, however, in continual suspense, because Sister never would say how long she intended to remain in the house that had been deeded to Miriam.

Next door, Oscar worried. He thought it was time for Sister to return home, and for Miriam to move into the front room. He mentioned his misgivings to Elinor, who said, “Leave it alone, Oscar. Don’t push things.”

“What do you mean, Elinor? What is there to push? Is there something you know about that you’re not telling me?”

“Nobody’s told me anything. If I were you, though, I’d just leave Sister and Miriam alone for the time being.”

“I have,” protested Oscar. “And now I just want to know how long this ‘time being’ is going to go on. Do you know?”

“I do not.”

“I’m gone have to go over there.”

Elinor didn’t waste any more words in an attempt to dissuade her husband, and that evening he knocked on the front door of his daughter’s house. Sister let him in. He hadn’t been inside the house for five years. “Sister, can I speak to Miriam for a minute?”

“Of course, Oscar. Let me go upstairs and get her.”

In a few minutes, Miriam came down alone. “Hello, Oscar,” she said, pointedly eschewing the appellation “Father.”

“Hello honey. I came over because I thought there were a few things we ought to talk about.”

“All right,” said Miriam, seating herself in the mahogany platform rocker which her grandmother had often occupied. Oscar sat in a corner of the blue sofa, where he had so often been placed as a child.

“Miriam, darling,” Oscar began, “your mama and I need to figure out what’s going to become of you.”

“How do you mean?”

“Where you’re going to go and what you’re going to do, now that Mama’s dead.”

“I’m not going to do anything,” Miriam replied calmly. “I’m not going to go anywhere.”

“You mean you don’t want to come over and live with your mama and Frances and me?”

“No, sir. I have my own room here, and I don’t want to leave.”

“You’d have your own room next door. Elinor says you could have the front room.”

“I don’t want that room—or any room in that house. I just want to stay here. This is my house. Grandmama left it to me because she wanted me to live here. And that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“But what happens when Sister goes back to Chattanooga? What would people in this town think if they heard I was allowing a sixteen-year-old girl to live all by herself in a big house like this?”

“They could think whatever they wanted,” returned Miriam. “What do I care what people think? I don’t intend to leave, and nobody can make me.”

“Your mama and I could make you,” said Oscar. “We’re your parents.”

Miriam looked directly at her father. “I suppose you could make me. I suppose you could rope me to the bed. I suppose you could stick food down my throat till I swallowed it.”

“You don’t want to live with us?” Oscar asked his daughter, plaintively.

“Of course, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“You didn’t want me when I was born. And now it’s too late.”

For a few moments, her father sat stunned.

“That was...sixteen years ago...darling!” Oscar faltered when he had recovered himself. “And Mama wanted a little girl of her own. You’re not sorry we gave you to Mama, are you?”

Miriam made no reply.

“You cain’t still be upset about that, not after all these years. You know how much your grandmama loved you. You know how happy you were with Sister and Mama. We would never have let you go if we hadn’t thought you were gone be happy as the day is long.”

Miriam looked at her father impassively and said nothing.

“Miriam, you are only sixteen years old. You cain’t tell me what to do and expect me to hop to it.” This injunction carried no conviction in Oscar’s mouth.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do, Oscar. I’m just telling you what I’m *not* gone do. And what I’m *not* gone do is leave this house, at least not of my own free will. You can get Mr. Key down here and have him throw me in jail for not doing what you tell me to do, or you can get Zaddie to tie me up with clothesline and put me in a croker sack and carry me over there on a cane pole, but that’s about the only way you will get me inside that house.”

“It hurts me to hear you speak like this, darling!”

Miriam said nothing.

“I’m gone send Elinor over here to talk to you. She’s gone have to try to talk some sense into your head about all this. You are so upset about Mama that you’re plumb not thinking straight.”

“If Elinor comes over here...”

“Yes?”

“...just tell her to make sure she brings me the rings she stole off Grandmama’s fingers. Otherwise, I’m not gone speak to her.”

Oscar sank deeper into the corner of the blue sofa where he had so often been placed as a child to listen to his mother’s pronouncements. He looked at his daughter Miriam as he had looked at Mary-Love Caskey in that far-off time. In his daughter, who was so great a stranger to him, he saw much of his mother. He understood for the first time that Miriam bore as much animosity toward Elinor as Mary-Love had. Oscar didn’t know what was to come of all this, but he now knew that Miriam would never take up residence in his house.

Miriam sedately rocked beneath the red-shaded lamp, her thick, carefully brushed hair falling across her face and shadowing her expression. She did not appear to concern herself overmuch with this discussion of her future. She seemed only politely to conceal her impatience with her father to get on with whatever it was he had come to say.

Seeing his daughter thus, Oscar decided to say no more. Miriam might be only sixteen, but Oscar decided that he would be very surprised if she did not get her own way. He wondered if Elinor had yet realized to what extent Miriam was prepared to take her grandmother’s place.

Chapter 42

The Linen Closet

Sister remained on in Perdido through the winter. There was speculation as to why she had deserted her husband in that manner. Early Haskew came to town for Christmas, but his visit was strained. He was gone again by New Year's. Perdido, and all the Caskeys—including Miriam herself—assumed that it was on Miriam's account that Sister stayed. Sister was sacrificing her own marriage at the whim of that spoiled girl, everyone thought. She elected to remain in Perdido in a house of mourning for the wholly inadequate reason that Miriam Caskey didn't want to move twenty yards to the west and take up residence in her parents' home.

No one ever brought this up to Sister Haskew directly. No one had the right. It was Sister's prerogative to throw her marriage away for Miriam's sake, as surely as it had been her right to marry against her mother's wishes.

Sister actually remained in Perdido, however, not for Miriam's sake but for her own. Sister hid behind the sacrificial theory of her conduct, rather than to admit—even to the members of her own family—that she had made a mistake in her choice of husbands.

In thirteen years of marriage, Early Haskew had coarsened. During their courtship, Early had been a resident in Mary-Love's house, and in those prosperous surroundings, he had been on his best behavior. After he and Sister were married, left Perdido, and began living on Early's meager and uncertain earnings, his country ways reasserted themselves. He chewed tobacco, a habit that Sister despised as much as did Miriam, though she would never have admitted it. And she never had grown accustomed to his eating peas off a knife. His habitual clumsiness deteriorated into slovenliness. His body grew fat and shapeless. He would take a biscuit, punch a hole in it with his forefinger, fill the hole with molasses, and then swallow the whole thing in one gulp. Pillowcases smelled of the rancid oil he used on his hair.

Early's friends were even coarser than he, so coarse that Sister wouldn't even allow them inside the house, but made them, on visits, remain on the front porch. They lived in a run-down section of Chattanooga, and Sister couldn't afford more than a woman who boiled

linen. She had to do the ironing herself. One day she came home from the grocery and discovered Early and two of his cronies lifting a Coca-Cola vending machine onto their front porch.

Early bred pit bull terriers for fighting, and seemed to care about nothing but those damned dogs—Sister never thought of them except in those words. He insisted on her rising twice each night to feed new litters out of a baby bottle. When the dogs weren't feeding they were yelping, and Sister got no sleep between-times. Early's coarseness finally wore her down. Now in Perdido, she was getting worn down by having constantly to defend her husband against that charge.

When Sister came into her inheritance, she at first had a vision of herself returning to Tennessee and buying a decent house, purchasing a new wardrobe for Early, encouraging him to drop his ne'er-do-well friends and his reprehensible pastimes, and raising him to a level of gentility commensurate with her own. This she thought was possible, yet it was a task she did not look forward to with relish. Early seemed too set in his ways, too far along the path in which he had been born. The real Early Haskew, Sister thought, was the Early Haskew who went about the house without a shirt and trained puppies to viciousness with slaps and red meat, the one who chewed tobacco and snored loud enough to wake all creation. The man she had met and married in 1922 had been a man caught then in a brief and deceptive stage of development, like one of his own handsome pups that would soon grow into a snarling vicious brute.

Mary-Love, Sister remembered, had known the change would come, and she had warned her. Sister herself might have foretold it, for there were many similar men around Perdido. Sister's marriage had been as much an act of defiance toward her mother as it had been an attraction toward Early. Early's attraction faded quickly for Sister, while her need to defy her mother continued strong and unabated till the day of Mary-Love's death—when it suddenly evaporated. With it went any good reason Sister had to return to the white frame house in the run-down section of Chattanooga, the pit bull pups, or Early Haskew.

She seized upon Miriam's desire to remain in Mary-Love's house as an excuse not to return to Tennessee. In using this as a disguise for her real motive, she was being craftier than her mother had ever been. Everyone thought that Sister's remaining in Perdido was a great sacrifice; no one for one moment suspected that she dreaded the day when Miriam would go off

to college or marry. Then Sister would have to announce her total disgust with Early Haskew.

. . .

Though she was only a few months liberated from her bed and wheelchair, the three years of crippling illness Frances had suffered were a misty time—garbled, drowsy, and leaden. She had grown in those missing years—not much, it was true—but enough to now make her unfamiliar with her body. Prior to that terrible time she had been a child, with a child's fears. Now she was nearly an adult; the childish fears were put behind her.

On the night of her return from the journey to Chicago, when Mary-Love lay in the casket in the front parlor, Frances slept in her own room. Elinor and Oscar had considered that their daughter might be terrified of sleeping in a house in which her grandmother's body lay, but Frances told them that there was no need for her to bother James or Queenie with her presence that night. She said this not because she no longer was afraid, but so that she might test the extent to which those fears remained with her. It had been no surprise to Frances that her grandmother had died in the front room.

After the funeral, as Zaddie helped her unpack her traveling clothes and all the new little treasures that James and Queenie had purchased for her, Frances could perceive no alteration in the atmosphere of the house because of the death in the front room. She even thought to herself, *Grandmama died in the next room,* but she didn't shake. She smelled the air and detected no odor of death or of her own fear. She stood in the hallway and looked down at the door of the front room. Still the fear didn't come. She approached the door and touched the handle gingerly—no electricity, no fear.

She turned the knob and pushed the door open. It swung wide and Frances stood on the threshold of the room, feeling nothing.

She looked into the room. She smelled nothing but the dried lavender that had been placed in a bowl on a table beside the bed.

Daringly, she stepped far enough into the room to be able to push the door shut behind her.

She looked at the closet door, and she said to herself, *Mama says Grandmama died of a fever. Sister says Grandmama would have lived if only Daddy had put her in the hospital. But I know that Grandmama was killed by whatever it is that lives in that closet.*

The closet door didn't open. Frances didn't die. "I am fifteen years old," she said aloud, "and I'm not afraid of closets that are filled with feathers and leather and fur."

Months passed, and Frances turned sixteen. She had never been close to her grandmother and had not seen her at all during her illness. She did not often think of her dead, and sometimes she actually forgot, when she looked out her bedroom window at Mary-Love's house, that Mary-Love had died the previous summer. Frances checked—as she had as a child—to see if her grandmother were sitting in her rocker by her bedroom window.

An Italian stone cutter in Mobile carved Mary-Love's monument in Georgia marble. It was raised seven months after her death. All the Caskeys attended the brief, informal ceremony. Miriam, Queenie, and Frances laid flowers. Frances once again thought, *Grandmama died in the front room.*

That night she fell asleep immediately and did not dream. And a short time later she was just as immediately awakened; not by any sound, but by a sense that something was horribly wrong.

Her room was suffused with a weak, bluish-white light. It shone through the window, as definite as though a streetlamp had been raised in the vicinity of her dead grandmother's house. She had no idea what the source of that strange illumination might be, but she stared with terror at the white sheer curtains over the window. She dared not rise to look out. She turned to the other window, that opened onto the screened sleeping porch. The porch, too, was illuminated by the glow, though it wasn't as strong as in her own room.

Then quite suddenly and with alarm, she remembered the light which had filled the front closet, and afterwards the entire front room, on the night that Carl Strickland had fired on them from the levee. Frances had been very young then, and all incidents that occurred prior to her long bout with illness were vague and dreamlike. But this light she recognized and remembered. It had been no dream then; it was no dream now.

It wasn't that unnatural light that raised fear in Frances's soul. Without her willing it, her head turned to look at the door that opened onto the narrow linen corridor that separated her room from the front room. She knew something had found its way into that narrow closed hallway. It was there, and she knew it wasn't a person. It wasn't her mother. It wasn't her father. It wasn't Zaddie. Whatever lived and hid in the front room closet had gotten out of the closet, roamed over the front room, opened the door of the

linen corridor, and had slunk down it. Now it waited on the other side of the door.

It wasn't her grandmother's ghost, but Frances knew that it was somehow connected with the raising of the marble stone over her grandmother's grave.

She lay terrified in her bed. The crippling arthritis seemed to have returned to her hands and feet. She tried to imagine what the thing on the other side of the door was like, but couldn't. She knew it was the color of the light outside, and that if she looked to the door again, she would see the light pouring through the crack beneath it. *That* was where the outside light was coming from. The front room was so bright that the light shone out of the windows, and that's what she was seeing through the curtains. The passage to the front room was filled with even brighter light, because whatever it was, was there, just behind her door. It had no outline that Frances's unwilling imagination could pin down because that outline shifted. She thought of a little boy wearing overalls with bulging pockets. She thought of a hunchbacked man crouching with his mouth open wide. She thought of a handsome, smiling woman with a rope of black pearls about her neck, holding a pound cake on a platter. Images faded into others and between them were shapeless things or shapes she couldn't recognize: fishy things, froggy things, snaky things, things with bulging eyes and webbed hands and shining rubbery skin. The images changed as quickly as shadows that passed across the windows of a train traveling through a sunlit forest. Frances lay with her eyes tightly closed for she knew not how long.

Hoping that her fear had its basis only in her mind, she tried to think of something else. If she wasn't close to sleep, she nevertheless seemed close to dreaming. In that half-dream she began to remember the years of her illness. It hadn't been all that long before, but the memories of that buried period of time were like those of earliest childhood, or the fugitive memories of a former existence. As Frances lay in her bed with her eyes tightly shut, trying to will out of existence the thing in the linen closet, she suddenly remembered two things about her illness, one of them impossible, the other improbable.

The first—the impossible—memory was of the thrice-daily baths she had received. At other, more conscious times, she had been able to recall vividly the moment that she was lifted out of the bathtub by her mother. But now—and the sensate memory was sharp despite the impossibility of the

thing—her conviction was that during those baths she had always been *fully immersed,* so that she had spent five or six hours a day with her entire body —including her head—beneath the water's surface.

The second memory—impossible too—was of a child, a little boy, who kept her company at night while her mother was asleep. He was younger than Malcolm, but older than Danjo. He was pale and unhappy, and used to pull on Frances's arm, wanting her to play games with him. She never remembered how he came to be in the room with her, but she knew that when he left, he always disappeared into the short passage that led to the front room.

That's who's in the passage now.

She opened her eyes suddenly, and stared at the door. Then audible words were on her lips, and she spoke them automatically, without realizing that she spoke: "Come on in, John Robert."

She didn't know any John Robert.

There was a sudden change behind the door, a kind of quiver or shudder.

The thing in the corridor had up to now been still. Frances knew the fluidity of its images and aspects had all been in her mind. The thing itself had sat immobile on the other side of the door.

Now its arm reached out toward the knob.

Frances leaped out of bed, flew past the blowing curtains shining bluish-white, and threw herself against the door to the linen corridor.

"No!" she cried, "I don't want you!"

Her feet glowed in the light that poured from beneath the door. She turned the key in the lock and immediately stumbled back, her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes, she could no longer see the light. The room was dark. She went to the window and looked out. All was still and black. The curtain sheers blew against her face.

She returned to her bed. Nothing was in the corridor. She fell asleep without even wondering if she could do so.

. . .

When she woke in the morning, she knew that all she had felt and seen and known had not been a dream brought on by the melancholy excitement of the day. Frances Caskey knew for certain that whatever it was that previously had been confined to the misshapen closet had somehow been allowed to range freely. What was worse was Frances's conviction that

some time she would again say, “Come on in, John Robert,” and not reach the door in time to lock it.

IV: The War

Chapter 43

At the Beach

Mary-Love had been dead for two years. In the months following the funeral, the Caskeys were watchful for shifts and transformations that were bound to happen in the makeup of the family. Alterations were slow and subtle. Elinor and Oscar and Frances were little changed, although Elinor's demeanor seemed easier now that her chief rival and enemy had finally been defeated in death. Frances was sixteen, a sophomore in high school, and the three years that she had spent in a bed of arthritic pain were distant and dim and only occasionally disquieting.

Next door, Sister Haskew had not gone back to her husband, who dutifully turned up each Christmas, and perhaps once or twice in between. With every visit he and his wife seemed more distant. This break between them had never been acknowledged. Sister would say, "Early travels so doggone much. How am I supposed to keep up with him? I'd much rather stay here in Perdido with Miriam, who needs me." The last part of this statement wasn't quite true, for Miriam—at eighteen—considered that she needed no one. She saw herself as her grandmother's true heir. More important than her grandmother's money and bonds and stock, which had been divided equally between Sister and Oscar, Miriam had inherited Mary-Love's house and—filial considerations notwithstanding—she had been endowed with Mary-Love's enmity toward Elinor Caskey. Miriam would not speak to her mother when they passed on the street, or wave when they saw each other out of the windows of their houses. Miriam would nod grudgingly to her father Oscar, and never lacked a cruel word for her sister Frances, whom she encountered frequently at school.

Sister and her strong-willed niece Miriam formed an unhappy household, always on edge, cringing beneath the lowering cloud of their individual secrets. Sister would not admit, even to Miriam, that she no longer loved her husband—that indeed she dreaded even his infrequent brief visits. Miriam would not declare open hostility toward her mother for fear that she would somehow be crushed by Elinor's superior knowledge of strategy and experience in combat.

In the house next door in the other direction, James Caskey had turned into an old man. Yet he was supremely happy in raising his nephew Danjo, now fourteen. Danjo loved James and never did anything that angered or disappointed his uncle. On the other hand, Danjo's older brother and sister —Malcolm and Lucille—were problems to Danjo's mother, Queenie Strickland. Malcolm was twenty and didn't seem able to do much of anything. He had once got a job in Cantonement, but had lost it after only a week. Another job down in Pensacola lasted even less time. When he returned to his mother in Perdido, Malcolm begged Queenie to find him a place at the lumber mill. Now Malcolm was in charge of a chipper, but due to his inattention was in constant danger of losing one arm or both in the claws of that great, explosive machine. At eighteen, Lucille still simpered and whined, but had grown pretty in a pasty sort of way. She exhibited her modest charms behind the candy counter in the Ben Franklin store and came home every day smelling of rancid popcorn oil. Both Lucille and Malcolm were concerned about the fact that they bore such menial positions. They were, after all, part of the all-powerful Caskey clan.

By owning the only industry in town, the Caskeys might have been considered to own the town itself. They didn't live as if this were the case, however. In delicate consideration of the straitened circumstances of those around them in Perdido, the Caskeys did not display the wealth they assuredly had accumulated. The worst part of the Depression was over, and they had come through it. To survive was to have done well, particularly in this distressed part of the country. The Turk and DeBordenave lumber mills, in operation for decades, had been shut down, and their machinery, land, and employees had been absorbed by the expanding Caskeys. After Mary-Love's death James had turned over the entire operation of the mill to his nephew Oscar. James no longer went to his office, but simply sat out on his porch all day long with his sister-in-law Queenie.

Oscar had played a close game with the mills in the past few years, taking careful advantage of the small opportunities that occasionally came his way. Every penny of the money he made was put back into the mills for expansion, modernization, or acquisition of forested land. By 1938, the Caskeys were rich in their holdings. Yet the mill, the window-and-sash plant, and the factory for the production of fence posts, utility poles, and railroad ties—all in peak condition and possibly the most technologically advanced in the country—were operating at perhaps no more than a quarter

of their capacity. Workers frequently were sent home at noon, but received a full day's pay. The Caskeys now owned nearly a third of a million acres of forest in five Alabama and Florida counties, but cutters never had to venture farther than five miles from town because orders were so few. Sister and James needed but little money to live on, for their lives were quiet. Yet even for that little they were forced to go to Oscar, who gave them what they needed in cash of small denominations. This arrangement seemed strange to Sister and James, for the Caskey households had never been restricted in such a manner. James finally asked Oscar if he was sure that he was pursuing the right course with their money and their mill holdings, to which Oscar replied, "Every penny is invested."

Sister said: "I know that, Oscar, but shouldn't we have a little in reserve?"

"We cain't afford to right now," replied Oscar. "We've got to make sure that when this country is on its feet again, we're right up there and ready to get going too."

"Oscar," said James firmly, "this country's been down for almost ten years. What you think's gone get it back up again? Now, I'm not worried for my sake, 'cause I know I can always get along. I just want to make sure that everything's gone be all right for Elinor and Frances and Sister and Miriam. What would happen to Danjo and Queenie and her children if anything happened to me?"

"Don't y'all trust me?" cried Oscar. "Don't y'all know what I'm trying to do?"

"No," said Sister. "I don't think James and I *do* know."

"I don't," agreed James.

"I'm trying to make us rich," Oscar announced.

"What for?" asked Sister. "Five years ago, when things were so bad for everybody, we had all the money in the world anybody could possibly want that was in his right mind. Now you say we're doing all right, but when I want to send Ivey out for a bottle of milk I've got to go over to the mill and break into petty cash."

"That's just for the time being," said Oscar. "And you know it's not that bad, Sister."

"What if it all goes bust?" asked James. "What do we do then?"

"It's not all gone go bust. Y'all just leave me alone for a little while and let me work this thing through. Y'all don't see it, but we're in a very

good position."

James and Sister *didn't* see it, but with some misgivings they decided to trust Oscar. "After all," James pointed out to Sister later, "what else can we do?"

If James and Sister had their doubts and gave Oscar no support in matters pertaining to the running of the Caskey mill, Oscar could always count on the trust and confidence of his wife. Elinor invariably said, "Oscar, I know you, and I know you're doing it right."

. . .

All the Caskeys attended the ceremonies marking the end of Miriam's high school career. They had discovered from the *Perdido Standard* that Miriam had attained valedictory status in her graduating class. She had said nothing of this, as if in an attempt to deny her family the pleasure of pride in her accomplishment. In her speech, faultlessly delivered, Miriam likened life to a nest of Chinese boxes, and mystified everyone. After the presentation of the graduation certificates, Miriam allowed herself to be kissed by everyone —even her mother, father, and sister. Miriam understood that on such an occasion she must submit to formalized indignities. The afternoon was brutally hot, and the high school seniors, in white gowns and tasseled mortarboards, wandered aimlessly over the football field with their families, as if all had been afflicted with heat fever. Oscar remarked to his daughter, as if he might have been speaking to one of Miriam's classmates whom he had never met, "You think you might be going on to college?"

Miriam paused before answering. "I'm thinking of it," she said at last.

"Where are you thinking of?" asked Elinor, taking advantage of the occasion to speak to her daughter directly and to the point.

"I'm not sure," replied Miriam hastily, glancing around and then running off to hug a detested classmate.

Sister later asked Miriam the same question, but not even she got a straight answer. James said to Sister, "We're not gone find out until the day Miriam takes off—if she does decide to do it."

Sister sighed and said, "Why you suppose Miriam is like that?"

James replied in surprise: "Because of Mary-Love, of course. Haven't you noticed, Sister? Miriam is just like your mama."

And so she was, laying her plans carefully and in secret.

The hot, high summer came on, and still no one knew what was to become of Miriam in the fall. This was a question of no small moment to

Sister, for if Miriam went away to school, Sister would have no ostensible reason to remain in Perdido. She would have to think up another excuse for not returning to her husband. And it was nearly inconceivable that Miriam would *not* go to college—a girl who was smart enough to have been valedictorian of her class, with as much social position and as assured a financial future as Miriam was blessed with, was bound for higher education. Sister grew so demoralized by the task of figuring out some way of not having to go back to Early Haskew that she self-indulgently talked herself into believing that Miriam would never go away at all.

So everyone waited impatiently for fall, to see what Miriam would do. But Miriam had an intermediate surprise. One day toward the end of June Miriam attended a party at the casino on Santa Rosa Island, across the bay from Pensacola. From that day forth, she was obsessed with the beach. Every day she departed at five-thirty in the morning in the little roadster she had been given by Mary-Love. She returned in time for the afternoon meal. Her skin grew darker and darker.

"Is she meeting a boy, you think?" Queenie asked James.

"I wonder," said James, and that night asked Sister the same question.

"Are you seeing a boy down at Pensacola Beach?" Sister asked Miriam the following noon when Miriam walked in the house with a towel over her shoulder.

Miriam seemed offended by the question. "Sister, I drive down there and I lie on the beach and soak up the sun."

"I was just wondering," said Sister.

That afternoon, wearing a white sundress that showed off her deep tan to startling effect, Miriam marched across the sandy yard and knocked on the door of her mother's house. Elinor came to the door.

"Elinor, is Frances around?" Miriam asked stiffly. She had hoped that Frances herself or perhaps Zaddie would answer the door. It irked Miriam to speak to her mother.

"No, she's not. She went downtown, but she ought to be back soon. You want to come in and wait?"

"No, ma'am, but when she gets back, would you tell her to come over and see me for a minute? I want to ask her a question." Miriam turned around and marched off before Elinor could say another word.

. . .

Frances was startled and alarmed by the summons from her sister, and she hurried next door to deal with the matter as quickly as possible, as a condemned criminal may urge that the time of execution be moved forward rather than put off. Miriam was reading a magazine by the window in her room upstairs.

"Miriam, Mama said you wanted to speak to me." Frances stood in the doorway to the room; Miriam did not encourage her to venture farther in.

"I did. I wanted to know if you wanted to go down to Pensacola with me tomorrow."

With the revelation of the reason for the summons, Frances's amazement only increased. "What…what for?" she stammered.

"To lie down on the beach."

Frances stared at Miriam almost as if in a stupor.

"Well," said Miriam impatiently. "Do you want to go or not?"

"Yes," blurted Frances.

"Can you be ready at five-thirty?"

Frances nodded.

"That's when I leave. If you're not out on your porch, I'll leave without you. I'm not gone be going up to Elinor's door and knocking at that hour of the morning, and I'm not gone call out to you, either. Are you gone be out on the front porch when I'm ready to leave?"

Frances nodded again.

"Good," said Miriam. "Ivey'll fix us something to take along, so don't worry about something to eat. If you're gone want to buy things at the concession stand, then you'd better bring a little money."

"All right," returned Frances, lingering hesitantly for further instructions.

None came. After a few moments, Miriam looked up and remarked, "Well, why don't you go away now? I'm busy."

In a daze, Frances wandered home. Neither her father nor her mother could interpret the significance of the invitation. Elinor called James to see if he or Queenie had any ideas about what it portended. They couldn't figure it out, and James called Sister. Sister didn't know for sure, but she had an idea: "Maybe Miriam wants everybody to know that she's not going down to Pensacola every day to meet a boy. That could be why she's taking Frances along."

. . .

Miriam drove fast. The top of the roadster was down, and the wind was so loud that the sisters were unable to talk to each other. The sun was still low in the sky at that hour of the morning. Miriam and Frances wore bathing suits under their sundresses. The ride took only slightly more than an hour, and when the sisters got to the beach it was still empty. The casino hadn't opened yet, but half a dozen fishermen had cast their lines from the end of the pier. Miriam walked a few hundred yards or so beyond the pier to a stretch of deserted sand and laid out her blanket. She silently pointed to where Frances should spread hers.

"Did you bring any lotion?" asked Miriam abruptly.

"No," said Frances. "Should I have?"

"Of course. You're going to burn anyway because you're not used to the sun, but without lotion you're going to be in horrible pain by the time we get home. Here, use some of mine."

Frances meekly submitted to being doused with the cold lotion. Miriam brusquely rubbed it in, and when she was finished with Frances, performed the same operation on herself.

"What do I do now?" asked Frances timidly.

"Nothing. Just switch sides every once in a while. And don't talk."

When Miriam lay on her stomach, tanning her back, she read. When she lay on her back, she closed her eyes and slept, or at least appeared to sleep.

Frances had never been so bored in her life, not even when she had been confined to her bed with arthritis. She hadn't brought anything to read. Her head was filled with the dull roar of the Gulf of Mexico. Sand fleas jumped onto her legs and bit them. The blindingly white sand and the washed-out sky bleached all color from the landscape, until everything seemed overwhelmingly pale and overwhelmingly bright, like the continual flash of a news camera. She could feel her skin beginning to burn. She dared not speak to her sister, who had peremptorily prohibited conversation.

Frances sat up on the blanket and began to look longingly at the water. At last, when she felt as if her skin were frying and the blood simmering in her arteries, she turned to Miriam and said, "Can I go in?"

"Go in where?" snapped Miriam.

"Go in the water."

"Yes. Though I don't know why you'd want to. I hate swimming. Watch out for jellyfish. Be careful of the undertow. Somebody saw a shark

out there on Wednesday."

"I'll be careful," said Frances, getting up from the towel.

She raced toward the water, and leaped into a wave just then crashing against the shore. The water was deliciously cool and she loved the motion of the waves. She even liked the taste of the salt. Frances had never been in the Gulf before. When she thought of water and bodies of water, she thought only of the muddy Perdido. The Perdido's voice was low, secretive, and made up of a hundred smaller noises, incessant and unidentifiable. The Gulf, on the other hand, had but a single voice, regular, loud, insistent. The Perdido's water was dark and murky, as if it purposely hid things in its depths; the Gulf water was bright and blue and white, and Frances could see her feet through it. The bed of the Perdido was a fathomless sheet of soft black mud in which dead things were concealed; underneath these crashing waves lay hard-packed white sand and millions of fragments of colored shells. Only an occasional sullen bream or catfish swam in the Perdido; here were clams gaping in the sand, bright clean seaweed, vast schools of minnows, and larger fish that sometimes flew cleanly out of the top of a wave.

Frances swam farther out where the fish were even larger. They moved lazily away at her intrusion. She perceived the undertow Miriam warned her against, yet somehow she did not feel she was in any danger. She let herself be pulled out farther. She now saw that the pier was no more than a dark line jutting into the water, and her sister was not visible at all. She realized that she was probably too far out, but still she was undisturbed. As she lazily swam back in toward shore she realized she had never been less than fully confident of her ability to do so.

"I thought you had drowned," said Miriam calmly, looking up from her book as Frances once again stood by her towel on the beach, dripping wet. "I looked up and you had disappeared. You must have gone out too far."

"No, no..."

"It's time to go home."

Frances glanced at her sister, puzzled. "It cain't be time to go home yet. We just got here."

Miriam looked up, shading her eyes. "How long do you think you were out in the water?"

"Twenty minutes? Half an hour?"

Miriam pointed up into the sky. “Look at the sun,” she said. “Straight overhead. It’s almost noon. You were in the water for over three hours!”

Frances looked up into the sky, then turned and gazed once more into the warm blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

. . .

Miriam was silent on the drive home, but Frances didn’t mind. Miriam steered with one hand on the wheel and stared pensively at the road through her dark glasses. Frances lay with her head back, limp but not exhausted. As they neared Perdido, Frances tried to think of a way to thank her sister for the surprising invitation, an invitation that had unexpectedly provided a mysteriously important event for her. When they pulled up before Miriam’s house, however, Frances had not yet found the courage to speak.

They got out of the car. “Thank you,” said Frances meekly, troubled by the inadequacy of her words.

“You better go buy you some lotion this afternoon,” said Miriam. “I cain’t keep on letting you use mine.”

Frances stopped dead in her tracks and considered this. “You mean we’re going back tomorrow?” she asked cautiously.

“I go every day,” said Miriam, not quite answering the question.

“And you’re inviting me to go again?”

Miriam wouldn’t go so far as to admit that. “I leave at five-thirty every morning, and there’s room in the car. But I never wait for anybody.”

Frances grinned and ran home. She told her astonished parents about the morning.

“Are you going again?” her father asked.

“Of course!” cried Frances. “I had a wonderful time!”

“You’re burned, darling!” said Elinor. “When you’re down there, I want you to spend all your time in the water. That way the sun won’t be so bad on your skin.”

“Oh, Mama! I love that water so much! I can hardly wait till tomorrow!”

Elinor Caskey seemed to take particular delight in this announcement, and for weeks thereafter was not heard to speak a word against Miriam, who had provided Frances with a way that she could swim in the Gulf every day.

. . .

The pattern for the entire summer was set that first trip. Every sunny morning of the week Miriam and Frances drove down to Pensacola Beach. Miriam rarely spoke to her sister, other than to say, “Are you ready?” or “Did you bring money for the toll bridge?” Miriam lay on her blanket, reading, napping, her skin growing ever darker and darker. Frances swam in the Gulf, sometimes breasting the waves, sometimes swimming in the calm water yards below the surface, sometimes lazily allowing herself to be dragged along by the undertow. Once she discovered herself so far out that a school of leaping porpoises passed around her. She threw her arms about one of the smaller ones and was pulled through the water for several miles at a pace faster than any she had ever known before. Another time she dived deep into the water in order to avoid being seen by the workers on a passing shrimp boat, and she narrowly escaped being caught in their trawling nets. When the boat was gone, Frances wondered why she had deliberately and instinctively avoided being seen. Then she realized that to be discovered so far from the beach would excite suspicion. The fishermen would not believe that a sixteen-year-old girl was not in danger bobbing in the water five miles from shore.

Something about the hours spent in the Gulf reminded Frances of the time of her sickness, and of even more vague and distant times before that. She seemed to lose consciousness the minute she breasted the first wave of the morning—or rather she seemed to lose her identity as Frances Caskey. She became someone—or something—else. She could swim from before seven o’clock when she and Miriam arrived at the beach, until eleven, without touching bottom, without feeling fatigue or fear of undertow, sharks, jellyfish, cramps, or loss of direction. When it was time to come in, she did not say to herself, *Miriam is getting ready to go.* Rather, she simply found herself walking up through the waves and onto the beach. The sensation was akin to her recollection of the baths her mother had given her during the course of her illness three years earlier. Frances remembered nothing about them except the moment that her mother took her beneath the arms and lifted her from the water. In that motion her identity, temporarily lost in the water, had come back to her. Rising through the breaking surf, feeling the sand and bits of shell beneath her feet, Frances’s old identity returned to her, and she forgot all that she had felt and experienced so far from the shore.

Miriam always made some remark to Frances that went something like: “I looked up for you once or twice, but I could never see you. Sometime I’m going to tell Oscar how far out you go. One day you’re going to drown, and everybody’s going to blame *me.*”

On the always wordless drive back to Perdido, Frances tried to remember exactly how she had spent those hours in the water; tried to recall how far out she had gone, how deep she had dived, what fish she had seen. But the sun beat against her eyelids, and she could fetch back nothing more than a vague impression of having plunged so deep that the sunlight produced only a dim sea-green radiance. Or she could summon up only a hazy recollection of having sat cross-legged on the undulating sandy bottom four miles out, or of having stalked and devoured sea trout and crabs that came temptingly near her. All these things were dreams, doubtless, for how could they have been real? Though Frances had spent four hours in the water, and had had no breakfast, she was never the least bit hungry when she trod up the sand toward the blanket on which Miriam lay sunning. At home her father urged her to eat just a little dinner, but her mother always said, “If Frances says she’s full, then we ought to leave her alone, Oscar. When she wants food, I guess she knows where to find it.”

Chapter 44

Creosote

One cloudless pink dawn in September 1938, Frances Caskey was sitting on the front porch of her family's house with her towel draped over her shoulder and a bathing suit on under her dress, waiting for Miriam to emerge from the house next door. No one in the family had been able to determine just why Miriam took Frances to the beach with her every day. It might have been to allay any suspicion that she was meeting a boy in Pensacola, it might have been that Miriam was surreptitiously glad of her sister's company, but whatever the reason Frances was happy to be taken along. On this particular morning, however, Frances waited but Miriam did not come. Although the two sisters had gone to the beach nearly every day for the past two months, they had spoken little, and Frances did not feel assured enough of their relationship to be able to knock on Miriam's door.

Elinor was surprised to find her daughter still sitting on the porch when she came down to breakfast about an hour or so later.

"What happened to Miriam?" Frances's mother asked.

"I don't know. Do you think she's sick?"

"I'll send Zaddie over to speak to Ivey," said Elinor. "Ivey'll know."

Zaddie returned in a few minutes with alarming news. "Miss Miriam packing up! Miss Miriam going away for good!"

At the moment this information was delivered, there was the sound of a door slamming, and Frances, Elinor, and Zaddie turned in time to see Miriam with two suitcases marching out the front door and down the sidewalk toward her roadster. Frances, bewildered, called out to her sister, "I guess we're not going to Pensacola this morning."

"I guess we're not," returned Miriam. "Do I look like I'm dressed for the beach?" She wore a white dress buttoned up the front and low-heeled red shoes. "Do I usually carry suitcases to Santa Rosa?"

"No," said Frances. "Where are you going?"

Miriam had already turned back toward the house. She spoke over her shoulder: "I'm going to college!"

No one had anticipated it. Not even Sister had an inkling of Miriam's plans. Sister stood nervously on the front porch with a cup of coffee,

watching as Miriam, now being assisted by Bray, carried bags and packages out to the car. James Caskey came out onto his porch, having sensed that something was up. Sister called over to him, “Miriam’s going off to college this morning!”

“No!” cried James Caskey. “Where’s she going?”

At that moment Miriam emerged with three hatboxes.

Sister replied to James pointedly, “I don’t know. She hasn’t told us yet where she’s going.”

All three Caskey households watched Miriam’s roadster fill up with boxes and suitcases. Frances had gone to her room and changed out of her bathing suit and was now once again on the porch. Danjo phoned Queenie, who arrived in haste. When finally the roadster would hold no more, Miriam turned at the end of the sidewalk and faced her assembled family.

“If y’all must know, I’m enrolling this morning at Sacred Heart in Mobile.”

“But that’s a *Catholic* school,” ejaculated Queenie.

“I’m converting,” snapped Miriam, climbing into the roadster. She started the engine, put the car in gear, and without further word pulled away from the curb. As she was turning the corner, she waved her hand once in an offhanded and general farewell to the open-mouthed Caskeys.

. . .

Everyone was stunned, particularly Sister. They had become so accustomed to Miriam’s daily trips to the beach and to her ever-deepening tan that they had forgotten all about the question of whether or not she was to go to college. Now, however, they agreed that it had been very much in character for Miriam to have done it the way she did.

“That girl,” said Elinor, “had rather slit her throat than tell you the time of day.”

“Here are the keys to the car,” said Oscar to his daughter. “You go on down to the beach alone.”

Frances shook her head. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

Though the dust raised by Miriam’s roadster still lingered in the air above the road, Frances already missed her sister. The weeks of driving together to and from Pensacola Beach had convinced Frances that her sister’s taciturnity, her impatience, her curt manner of speaking were only part of Miriam’s essential character.

After breakfast, Oscar went over and visited Sister. They sat on the side porch in the swing. “I suppose this was as much of a surprise to you as it was to the rest of us,” Oscar said.

“It was,” said Sister desolately. “I always wondered why Miriam would never let me pick up the mail at the post office, why she insisted on going by herself. It must have been because she didn’t want me to see any letters that were coming to her from Sacred Heart.”

“I don’t think I know anybody who ever went there,” said Oscar. “Why you suppose she picked *that* school?”

Sister shrugged. “Oscar, I long time ago gave up trying to figure out why Miriam said or did anything at all. I love her, but I don’t understand her.”

“She sure is like Mama,” said Oscar, shaking his head.

“Except she’s young,” Sister pointed out, “so it’s worse.”

“What are you gone do?”

Sister glanced quickly at her brother. “What do you mean?”

“Now that Miriam’s gone. Now that you don’t have to stay here and take care of her anymore—not that Miriam ever *needed* much taking care of. You going back to Early? Where *is* he these days, anyway?”

“Ohio,” said Sister vaguely. “Or Kentucky. Or somewhere.”

“You going back up to Chattanooga?”

“Oh, I thought I’d stay around here for a little while. I’m sure Miriam forgot something or other and is gone want it sent down. I guess I better wait around to see what it is.”

“Elinor could do that if you wanted to get on back to Early.”

Sister didn’t reply.

“Well?” said Oscar after a few moments.

“Oscar,” said Sister, rising in haste, “you stop going on about this, you hear? You let me do what I want!”

“All right,” said Oscar, confused and abashed by his sister’s vehemence. “I just thought—”

“You thought wrong,” said Sister in a low voice. “This house belongs to Miriam, and she said I could stay on as long as I wanted. I would appreciate it if you would not come over here early in the morning and try to sweep me out of it!”

“Sit down, Sister. I didn’t mean to get you upset.”

Sister sat down again, but crossed her legs, put her elbow on her knee, and cradled one cheek in her turned-up hand. She was the very picture of a southern spinster of the patrician variety—tall, slender, with prematurely wrinkling parchment skin that was powdered with the scent of roses. When not pinched in a scowl, the intrinsically fine features of her face drooped. Although her expression lacked both robustness and determination, she very much resembled her dead mother. Mary-Love would have been proud. This lack of strength was the result of all the years of Mary-Love's taunts and slights and domination.

"Sister," said Oscar softly, "see, I just didn't know you were having trouble with Early..."

Sister sighed. "It's not trouble, Oscar. It's just that I don't particularly care to go back to him right now." Oscar said nothing, and Sister continued tentatively, "Early travels, he's always on the road. So many places are raising up levees, you'd think the whole world was in danger of flooding. Or maybe it's just that there's somebody up in the CCC that likes Early a whole lot, and gives him work. I don't want to go with him to all those old places."

"What about your house in Chattanooga?"

"I'd be all alone there! That's not my home—*this* is my home. If I'm gone be all alone, then I might as well be here in Perdido. You and Elinor hate having me next door, is that it?"

"That is not it and you know it. We just want you to be happy."

"Then I'm happy right here, and I'd appreciate it if you would speak one word to everybody concerned, Oscar. Say I do not want to leave this house unoccupied. Say I don't know what would become of Ivey if I went away. Say I am providing a place for Miriam to come home to on her holidays. Say anything you want. Just don't let people keep coming up to me the way you just did, and saying, 'Sister, I know Early's gone be glad to see you...'"

Oscar promised to ease his sister's way.

. . .

A card arrived two days later with Miriam's address on it, but nothing else. Both Sister and Frances wrote to her immediately to say how much she was missed. For the next two weeks they hoped for a reply, but no response to their bashfully tender letters was forthcoming. They did not write again.

Sister was seeing what it was like, for the first time in her life, to live alone. The only really difficult time was in the early evening after Ivey had gone home to Bray in Baptist Bottom. Sister ate her supper alone, and sat on the porch and sewed or looked at magazines. At these lonely times, she didn't miss Miriam so much as she missed her mother. Sister was forty-six, but she felt a lot older. She was married, but she thought of herself as an old maid. One morning she said to Ivey, "Ivey, does your daddy still raise bird dogs?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then I think I'm gone go out and get me one." She did just that, and having had experience with Early's pit bulls, she was able to wean the puppy successfully herself. She loved the dog very much and called it Grip. Grip eased Sister's loneliness, though Ivey had dire predictions regarding a bird dog not brought up to hunt.

. . .

Queenie quit work at the Caskey mills when James gave up his office there. Her salary, however, continued to be paid out of her brother-in-law's pocket. In exchange for this support—though the bargain was never formally struck between them—Queenie became more than ever a steadfast and indefatigable companion to James. James and Queenie sat on his front porch in the morning, and drove around town in the afternoon. Sometimes they drove down to Pensacola or Mobile for lunch or else went shopping together; James liked to buy clothes as much as Queenie did. Some days were devoted to his wardrobe, other days to hers. Queenie and James were so intimate that without hesitation Queenie could admit, "James, when I first came to this town—when was it, 1922 I guess—I put it in my head that I was gone get rid of Carl and marry you, 'cause you were a rich widower." She laughed the old shrill laugh that had become dear to him.

James laughed too. "Queenie, you were barking up the wrong tree. I was an old man even then, and I never *was* cut out for marriage. My daddy always used to say I had the 'stamp of femininity' on me, and I wasn't ever gone be any use to anybody—man, woman, or child."

"Your daddy was wrong! That was a terrible thing to say to you."

James Caskey shrugged. "Carl's dead," he said. "You want me to marry you now?"

"You're too old, James Caskey."

"I'm sixty-eight."

“That’s too *old*,” squealed Queenie. “I’m only forty-eight, that’s just two years older than Sister. I’m gone go out and look for me a *young* man...”

In such merry chafing they passed their days and evenings together. And if either had problems or difficulties they never hesitated to confide in each other. Just at this time, Queenie’s principal difficulty was with her son Malcolm.

Malcolm disliked his work at the mill, which was monotonous, noisy, and ill-paying. He did not stop to consider that he was unqualified for anything else. He lived at home, for he hadn’t money to live elsewhere. He was rude to his mother and sister. He had taken up with a bad crowd in town. His particular crony was one Travis Gann, who painted utility poles with creosote at the mill. As a consequence of that pervasive odor, it was impossible for Travis to sneak up on anyone. His whole house smelled of it. Even his dog stank of the tarry substance. Travis, who did not have a mother to keep him in check, had all of Malcolm’s bad habits and tendencies, but he had a few more years of experience than Malcolm. Malcolm was, in a sense, apprenticing himself to Travis Gann and his ways.

Queenie knew about Travis Gann. She knew that her son went with Travis to the racetrack in Cantonement on Saturday, and lost what money he had not spent on liquor the night before. She knew that when Malcolm went out of the house after supper he was on his way to Travis’s. Malcolm’s clothes began to smell of creosote.

One Saturday afternoon, as Queenie and James were driving back from Pensacola and passed a road sign pointing toward Cantonement, Queenie said, “I bet if we went over to the dog track we’d find Malcolm and Travis Gann, betting all their money. James, I wish you would go to Oscar and tell him to fire that man Travis. That would make me very happy.”

James protested, “You cain’t fire a man because he’s taken up with your boy, Queenie. If it wasn’t Travis Gann it’d be somebody else. You know that. Malcolm just takes after Carl, I guess.”

Queenie shook her head ruefully, and sighed. “What am I gone do?” she said softly.

. . .

Queenie was wrong, however. Her son and Travis Gann were not in Cantonement. In Queenie’s car they had driven out on the forest road that led eventually to Bay Minette and Mobile. Six miles out of Perdido they

pulled up before a weather-beaten, dusty general store. A tin Coca-Cola sign above the door bore one word: Crawford's. Both young men got out, carrying shotguns that had belonged to Carl Strickland.

They went into the store, which was as weather-beaten and dusty within as without. Two long aisles of grimy shelving led back to a grimy counter on which there were large glass jars of cookies and a cash register. Beyond this was a green baize curtain which evidently opened into the house behind the store. Behind the counter stood a weather-beaten and worn-looking middle-aged woman, who said timidly, "You boys ought not bring those guns in here. I'm scared of guns. My daddy shot my mama by mistake when I was a little girl."

Travis Gann said, "You give us all the money you got and we'll take our guns back out."

"You gone shoot me?" she asked.

Travis Gann raised his gun, took aim at her, and grinned. "No, ma'am," he said, but did not lower the weapon.

The woman trembled, and falteringly pressed a key of the cash register. She put all the money from the single small drawer of the register into a penny sack that was intended for the cookies from the glass jars. During this transaction Malcolm stood near the door watching apprehensively for anyone's approach. Travis Gann went closer to the woman and took the money.

"You...gone shoot me?" the lady faltered again.

"You got any money in back there?" said Travis Gann, pointing toward the back.

The woman shook her head. "Dial's back there. Dial's my husband. He's not right," she whispered, tapping her temple. "Better stay out of there."

"You got money back there," said Travis Gann, casually lifting the rifle in the crook of one arm so that it was pointed at the woman's stomach.

"Let's go!" cried Malcolm. "Somebody coming down the road."

"Bye-bye," said Travis Gann with a smile and a wink. He and Malcolm ran to the car, awkwardly secreting the shotguns from the sight of those in the oncoming vehicle. As Malcolm started the engine, the car he had seen approaching drove right on past.

"Let's go back," said Travis Gann. "She's got money in the back."

"No," said Malcolm, moving the car swiftly back onto the road. "Lord God, Travis, I was scared to death in there! I thought for sure you were gone blow that old lady's head off!"

"I wisht I had," Travis mused. "I never done that before."

. . .

Dollie Faye Crawford ran back into the house and got her husband's gun. She didn't know whether or not it was loaded. She dashed to the front door of the store and peered through the screen. She just got a glimpse of the car as it sped off and in the dust she couldn't read the numbers on the license plate. By the colors, however, she knew that it was an Alabama tag. She went to the telephone and called the Perdido police and said to Charley Key: "This is Dollie Faye Crawford out on the Bay Minette road. Two boys just robbed me. They were driving a dark blue Ford, about a '34 I'd say, with Alabama tags. They took off in your direction. One of 'em smelled just like creosote."

"How much did they take?" the sheriff asked.

"Everything I had," replied Mrs. Crawford.

"Miz Crawford, I'll do what I can. You call up and speak to the Bay Minette police, too, you hear?"

"The creosote man said he was gone shoot me, but he didn't," said Mrs. Crawford, and then she hung up the telephone.

There were only two dark blue '34 Fords in Perdido. One belonged to the high school principal's wife; the other was Queenie Strickland's. Charley Key rode by the high school principal's house, and hollered out the window to the principal, who was watering his grass, "You been out robbing stores this afternoon?"

"No!" shouted the principal. "I haven't got time for foolishness."

Queenie Strickland's automobile was not in front of her house. Inside, Lucille told the sheriff that Malcolm and Travis Gann had taken the car out about an hour before, but hadn't said where they were going.

"Old Travis," said Sheriff Key, "he works at the mill, don't he?"

"Yes, sir," replied Lucille. "And he just *stinks* of that old creosote. I don't let him come near me! You want to see one of them, Sheriff?"

"I want to see 'em both."

"You want me to give 'em a message?"

"I want to sit on your front porch and wait for 'em to come home is what I want. What's your name?"

“Lucille.”
“Lucille,” said the sheriff, “you got some iced tea? I sure am hot.”

Chapter 45

Dollie Faye

Malcolm Strickland and Travis Gann were arrested that evening by Charley Key, charged with armed robbery, and thrown into the five-cell lockup in the Perdido town hall. Queenie and James appeared there about ten minutes after the doors had been slammed shut on the two men.

Malcolm sat sullenly on a bench against the outside wall, shading his eyes from the harsh glare of the single electric bulb dangling from the ceiling. “Don’t say it, Ma.”

“Say what?” demanded Queenie. “That you’re no good? That you’ve finally done it this time? Well, I will say it. You’re no good, Malcolm Strickland. You certainly have done it this time. And you, Travis Gann,” she turned to the smirking man sprawled in another corner of the cell, “you put my boy up to this.”

“Lord, Miz Strickland,” drawled Travis, his creosote stench filling the cell, “I couldn’t have talked Malcolm into doing anything he didn’t want to do.”

“Mama, Uncle James, are you gone get me out, or are you just gone stand there and preach?”

Queenie wouldn’t reply.

“We’re gone get you out,” said James softly.

“Good,” said Malcolm. Both men rose.

“Not you, Mr. Gann,” said James Caskey.

“Aw, hey...” he protested. “I don’t have no rich relatives to pay my bail.”

“Then you’ll just have to stay in here and rot,” said Queenie. “Malcolm, are you gone promise me before you get out of here?”

“Promise you what, Mama?” asked Malcolm apprehensively.

“That you are never gone have anything more to do with this man in your entire life?”

Travis Gann grinned.

“Sure. Mama, you know how much we got?” Malcolm said ruefully, glancing at Travis. “We got twenty-three dollars.”

James shook his head. “It’s costing me a hundred to get you out of here.”

Charley Key appeared with the keys of the cell in his hand.

“Mama,” said Malcolm in a low voice, reaching for his mother through the bars, “am I gone go to jail?”

“Where do you belong?” she returned tartly. “You belong in jail for putting James and me through this shame.”

“Evening, James,” said the sheriff. “Evening, Miz Strickland. You got a lousy excuse for a son here.”

“I was just telling him that, Sheriff,” said Queenie. “But he’s not as bad as his friend there.”

“Your mama’s got a tongue,” remarked Travis Gann, as Malcolm was being let out of the cell. “Miz Strickland, you ought to watch that tongue of yours. Someday somebody might come up to you and tear it out of your head and wrap it around your neck and choke you to death with it. And who’d get you out of jail *then*, Malcolm?”

“Watch out, Travis,” murmured the sheriff. “Don’t go threatening people now. Somebody might start to take you serious, and lift your chin with a rifle barrel. Lift it right through the top of your damned head.”

Queenie pulled Malcolm a few feet along the corridor out of Travis Gann’s sight—but not out of range of his laughter. “Let’s go,” she said to James.

James was in front of another cell, chatting with two former mill employees; they had been hired by James thirty years before. They were in jail for brawling. “Hey,” he was saying, “you two are too old to be fighting over a woman. And you’re too poor to be fighting over money. What was it?”

“Plain old hard times,” replied the one.

“Nothing else to do,” returned the other.

Outside, James paid both men’s bail.

. . .

Out on the Bay Minette road, in the house in back of Crawford’s store, Dollie Faye Crawford had taken to her bed. She was surrounded by neighbors and relatives who had flocked to her in the time of her distress. It was universally judged that she had almost had a stroke. Her blood pressure, as a result of the terrifying incident, was dangerously high. Her

husband Dial rocked peaceably in a corner of the room out of everyone's way.

The store was shut, but friends and relatives bearing gifts of food and consolation out of Bibles marked with scraps of paper knocked on the side door of the house. They were admitted by a faded little girl who had been given a pocketful of cookies from one of the jars on the counter of the store in payment for the task. At around eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, the day after the robbery, everyone had gone off to church, and Dollie Faye and Dial were left alone. There was a timid knock at the door, and the little girl opened it.

"Who is it?" called Dollie Faye weakly. "Who's not going to church this morning?"

Into the room walked two visitors the likes of which Dollie Faye and Dial Crawford weren't accustomed to—town people, moneyed people; people whose clothes were new, store-bought, and neither dusty nor faded.

"Yes, ma'am, yes, sir, what can I do for you?" said Dollie Faye, attempting to rise from the bed.

"Don't you dare get out of that bed, Miz Crawford!" cried Queenie.

"Miz Crawford," said James, "you probably don't know us from Adam and his little sister, but Queenie and I have come to apologize and make amends."

"For what?" said Dollie Faye, still trying to get out of bed. Queenie went around and put a stop to *that.*

"It was my boy," said Queenie in a low doleful voice, "who pointed a gun at your head yesterday!"

Dollie Faye fell back against the pillow in surprise.

"Your boy!"

"Yes, ma'am," said James.

"He is no good," said Queenie. "I could *kill* him for scaring you like he did."

"Your boy smell of creosote?"

"No, ma'am," said James. "That was the other boy. That was Travis Gann. He *is* no good."

Dollie Faye, who seemed to have recovered slightly, turned to Queenie and said, "Your boy wasn't the one who said he was gone kill me. It was the other one—the one who smelled like creosote. Your boy didn't want to be there. I could see it in his face. He was 'bout scared as I was."

"I'd like to scare him," said Queenie vehemently. She took a chair beside the bed, and leaned forward confidingly. "I'm gone tell you something, Miz Crawford," she said in a low voice. "My boy Malcolm takes after his daddy. His daddy was in the pen, more than once, though I am ashamed to have to say it. The best thing I can say about Malcolm's daddy is that he has been dead for the last five years."

"Now Miz Crawford," James said, glancing at Dial and seeing instinctively that he was not to be an active part of any of this business, "we have brought you some money to make up for what those boys took."

"I nearly forgot, I was so busy apologizing!" cried Queenie, and opened her purse. She handed ten twenty-dollar bills to Dollie Faye.

Dollie Faye cried, "This is so much! I only had twenty dollars in the register yesterday. What'd they do with all them pennies, anyway?"

"Spent 'em at the track," said Queenie with a vigorous nodding of her head. "Every damn one! Oh, 'scuse me, Miz Crawford. I didn't walk in this house with the intention of swearing in your face."

"Y'all call me Dollie Faye."

"Dollie Faye," said James, "Queenie and I want to know what we can do for you."

"Not a thing more, thank you," replied Dollie Faye hastily. "I am taken care of. People have been real good. And you have given me *too much* money."

"When are you gone be able to get out of this bed?" asked Queenie.

"Doctor says I ought to be here a week. See, I've got pressure trouble. Mama died of it. But I'm gone be all right. I *got* to be all right, 'cause I got to get up and run that store. Dial—that's my husband over there in the corner—don't even know how to run the register. And don't know much about stock neither, when it comes down to it. Sometimes I let him wash off windshields, but not much more than that. Used to have a boy to pump gas, but he run off somewheres..."

"You're not gone get out of that bed," said James Caskey sternly.

"I wish I could stay in it," said Dollie Faye, "but there's people 'round here depend on me and this store."

"I'm gone run it," said Queenie, squeezing Dollie Faye's hand.

"You?!"

"I used to work in the Ben Franklin up in Nashville, the big store they had up there. I know how to work a register."

“Queenie’s real quick,” James assured her.

“But you cain’t just up and run my store for me!”

“I know why you’re refusing,” said Queenie in a low earnest voice. “It’s ’cause you don’t want the mother of the boy that put a gun to your head hanging around. You don’t want to have to look in her suffering face.”

“No! It’s just that it’s so much trouble out here. There’s always somebody wanting something special that only I know anything about, and __”

“Cain’t I step back in here and ask you things?”

“I guess you could...”

“It’s settled then,” said Queenie firmly.

“You cain’t pump gas,” objected Dollie Faye.

“My boy can,” whispered Queenie, leaning forward. “See, I’m gone make him quit his job at the mill. He wasn’t any good at it anyway, and I don’t want him hanging around with those men—he might find himself another Travis Gann. I’m gone bring him out here and make him work off what he stole from you. But you’re not even gone see him, I’m not gone let him step foot in this store. Just looking at him might send your pressure up. I saw that little bench out in front, and he’s gone sit out there all day long pumping gas, and if Mr. Crawford’s weary of washing windshields, then let him take his ease, ’cause Malcolm will do it for him.”

. . .

On the following day, the Crawford’s store was opened again, and Queenie Strickland had installed herself behind the counter in her second-best dress. Malcolm was out front pumping gas as instructed. James was there too, and he sat and visited with Dollie Faye, every now and then addressing a remark to Dial Crawford, who nodded sagely and kept rocking. At noontime and with Dollie Faye’s permission, a very red-faced Malcolm was ushered inside and made a stammering apology. Dollie Faye said, “What you did was wrong, and you near about broke your sweet mama’s heart. But I forgive you, Malcolm, for her sake and for your own.”

For the next two weeks Queenie presided over the store; Malcolm went on pumping gas, and James continued to sit beside Dollie Faye’s bed. Even when Dollie Faye had recovered and resumed her place behind the counter, Queenie and James were not much less assiduous in their attendance on her, and Malcolm kept his place at the pumps. Malcolm’s trial was scheduled for the first Wednesday in November, the day after the

elections. Queenie drove Dollie Faye to the Bay Minette courthouse and sat with her in the courtroom all the morning long. There were two murders to be tried before the armed robberies came up and the two women observed the proceedings with interest.

Malcolm and Travis were tried together. Dollie Faye testified to the events of that September Saturday. Travis Gann had threatened to blow her head off, he had raised his gun and taken aim, he had carried the money off himself. Obviously ill at ease during the robbery, Malcolm Strickland had cautioned against violence. Dollie Faye was convinced that he had been roped into the whole business completely against his will. She testified that she believed that Malcolm would have come to her rescue had Travis actually attempted to kill her. Moreover, since the crime, Malcolm had more than made up the money that had been taken from her by assisting with the running of the store. Everybody in the courtroom had seen him pumping gas, changing oil, and washing windshields. Dollie Faye had nothing but good to say about Malcolm Strickland and his mother and his uncle, who had been good to her like good Christians ought to be.

After Dollie Faye's testimony Malcolm Strickland was let off with a reprimand, while Travis Gann was sentenced to five years in the Atmore penitentiary.

At the defendants' table, the two young men looked at each other.

"I guess," said Malcolm, "it looks like I'm out and you're in."

"I guess," said Travis Gann with a grin that Malcolm did not expect.

"Hey," said Malcolm, "five years—that's a long time. I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry," said Travis, still with the grin. "They're sending me to Atmore. You know how hard it is to get out of Atmore?"

Malcolm shook his head, grateful that because of the court decision he had no use for such information.

"Getting out of Atmore," said Travis, "is like climbing over a rotten log in some old farmer's pasture, that's what getting out of Atmore is like."

"You ought to wait till you get in there, before you start thinking about getting out," warned Malcolm.

"No, not me. I'm already thinking about what I'm gone be doing once I'm free."

The senseless grin seemed to be frozen on Travis's face and it was beginning to make Malcolm uneasy. Queenie and Dollie Faye were

beckoning to him. Malcolm turned back to Travis and asked: “What you gone do, Travis?”

“I’m gone teach some people a lesson, that’s what I’m gone do.”

“Who you talking about?”

“I’m talking about people walking around free that ought to be in jail with their friends, that’s the first kind I’m talking about.” Just in case Malcolm had not understood this, Travis Gann punctuated the statement by poking a finger against Malcolm’s chest.

“And I’m talking about an old lady who don’t mind seeing her boy’s best friend get himself in real trouble. An old lady,” Travis went on with greater specificity, “who had just as soon see me rot in jail as not.” Travis turned his grin toward Queenie and called out, “Hey, Miz Strickland, you better come get your boy here ’fore I get him in any more trouble.”

At this, Queenie marched over and took Malcolm’s arm. She said, “Travis Gann, you got what you deserved. I’m not a bit sorry for you.”

“I know that,” Travis said, still grinning. “I know it very well. But maybe someday you will be. Sorry, I mean.”

Queenie took Malcolm out of the courtroom. Travis Gann was returned to his cell to await transfer to Atmore. Two more defendants took the young men’s place at the table, and Alabama law and justice continued.

That afternoon, sick of pumping gas and even sicker of his enforced penitence, Malcolm Strickland stole his mother’s car, drove to Mobile, and joined the army. He did not think it necessary to tell his mother of Travis Gann’s thinly veiled threats. It couldn’t be *that* easy to escape from Atmore.

Chapter 46

Sacred Heart

After Miriam's departure for college, Sister remained aloof from her brother Oscar and his wife. But one evening in November, Sister sat in her dining room alone, eating leftovers and gazing out the window at Oscar's house next door. She could see her brother and his family having supper in their dining room. Frances was talking, and Oscar and Elinor were laughing at whatever it was their daughter was saying. Sister could even faintly hear their voices. She had a sudden revelation. She ran out and across the sandy yard, then called up toward the dining room window, "Hey, Oscar! Elinor!"

Elinor came to the window, and peered out into the evening gloom. "Sister?"

"Can I come in for a few minutes?"

"Of course you can. Come on in." Elinor went into the front hallway.

"Elinor," said Sister as she stepped inside the house, "I want to apologize. I cain't *imagine* what I was thinking of."

"Thinking of when?"

Oscar appeared in the dining room doorway with his crushed napkin in his hand and his mouth still full of food. "Hey, Sister, how you?"

"Oscar, you know how I am. I'm as lonesome over there as an old rail fence stretching off into nowhere."

"Then why haven't you come to see us before?"

Sister went into the dining room, sat at the table, and accepted the cup of coffee that Zaddie brought to her. "I don't know where my head could have been," said Sister.

"Sister, what *are* you talking about?" said Oscar.

"The reason I haven't come to visit was because of Mama and Miriam. Neither one of 'em ever came here any more than they absolutely had to."

Oscar and Elinor nodded in silent assent.

"But Mama's dead and Miriam's gone off to school, and I was sitting there all alone, seeing your lights over here, thinking, 'Well, I cain't go over there, Mama'd kill me or Miriam wouldn't speak to me.' Then all of a sudden I realized how foolish I was being, so here I am."

Oscar laughed. "Sister, those two had you *trained."*

“They sure did!”

“I hope you’re going to come over and see us all the time, now,” said Elinor.

“I sure would like to,” sighed Sister. “And maybe I will.”

“What’s going to stop you?” asked Elinor.

“Who knows?” said Sister darkly. “That’s the problem with this family—you cain’t count on anything staying the same for long.”

Thereafter, Elinor and Oscar wouldn’t hear of Sister’s eating supper by herself in that dark old house. In the afternoon, Elinor frequently called across the yard, “Sister, come on over here and keep me company.” Sometimes, Sister and Elinor went shopping together. “Elinor,” Sister once said, “you married Oscar seventeen years ago. We’ve all grown old since then, but this is the first time you and I have spent any time together. I get mad at Mama and Miriam when I think of all the things they kept me from doing.”

“Blame Mary-Love,” returned Elinor. “Don’t blame Miriam. Miriam wasn’t grown up. You could have told Miriam what to do, and Miriam would have had to do it. You were weak, Sister. But after being brought up by that mama of yours, I don’t see how you could have been any other way.”

. . .

There were other alterations in the relationships within the Caskey family that autumn. When Malcolm ran away to join the army, Queenie was distraught, and begged James to send somebody to fetch him back. But James argued that Malcolm was twenty-one and could do what he pleased. “Besides,” James pointed out while they were choosing an automobile to replace the one Malcolm had stolen, “you have always said that what Malcolm needed was a good dose of army discipline.” So Queenie allowed herself to be lightened of the burden that had been her son. She no longer worried about him, but indulged herself to a greater extent than ever before in James’s company. Lucille complained that her mother was never at home, and that she always knew where to find her, which was over at Uncle James’s. James and Queenie gossiped, James and Queenie went shopping in Pensacola and Mobile, James and Queenie had no secrets from one another. Then they began making visits in Perdido as a couple. Some lady in town would say to her friend, “I’m bored to death. Let’s call up James and Queenie and see if they won’t come over and talk a spell.” Or another lady

would say, “Let’s ride by James’s house and see if Queenie and him are out on the porch.”

Together, Queenie and James paid visits to Elinor. Often they found Sister with her. These visits soon lost the formal aspect that they had had at first; they became as easy and natural as Perdido had always thought they should be, with all the Caskeys living in adjacent houses. Soon the households began taking meals together. It seemed foolish to have Zaddie, Roxie, and Ivey cooking three complete different meals when everyone might meet at Elinor’s for the big meal of the day and enjoy themselves more. The three black women got together early in the morning, planned the meal, then retired to their separate kitchens to prepare their individual parts. In mid-morning, Roxie and Ivey could be seen bearing steaming pots and casseroles across the sandy yards beneath the water oaks. Everyone gathered at noon. James or Oscar said grace, and for an hour the Caskeys were as happy as any family had the right to be.

One day Oscar, from his usual spot at the head of the table, said, “Y’all, I just thought of something. None of this would have been possible when Mama was alive. She would never have let us do this.”

Everyone at the table grew quiet. Everyone knew that Oscar spoke the truth, and the indictment against Mary-Love was telling.

Ivey, bringing in a plate of hot rolls, said, “Miss Mary-Love didn’t like to see nobody rich, ’less she was the one put the fi’ dollar in their hand.”

Roxie, who was serving iced tea, said, “Miss Mary-Love didn’t like to see nobody happy ’less she was the one put happiness in their head.”

Zaddie, holding open the kitchen door, said, “Miss Mary-Love wouldn’t speak to me, just ’cause I belonged to Miss El’nor and not to her. If Miss Mary-Love was to see all of you here together, she’d fall down to the floor in a fit!”

There was another moment of silence, as Mary-Love Caskey was remembered by her family.

“Mama’s dead, though,” said Sister, lifting her glass with a slight smile.

. . .

After this noontime meal, when Oscar had returned to the mill, Lucille to the Ben Franklin store, and Danjo and Frances to the high school, the others usually went upstairs and sat on the screened porch with more glasses of iced tea. One afternoon a few days before Thanksgiving, Queenie, Sister,

Elinor, and James were on the porch making plans for the holiday meal, when Luvadia Sapp made an appearance in the doorway and said, “Mr. James, they’s a car out in front of your house, and somebody getting out.”

“Who is it?”

“Don’t know.”

Everybody rose and peered out. They could see only a corner of the automobile parked in front of James’s house.

“I better go down and see,” said James.

Everybody went down to see, and what everybody saw was James’s daughter Grace, striding up the sidewalk with two enormous suitcases.

After graduation from Vanderbilt, Grace had taught physical education at a girls’ school in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and had lived with another young woman whom the Caskeys always referred to as “Grace’s particular friend.” At first this particular friend’s name was Georgia, but then it altered itself to Louise, and later to Catherine. So far as Grace’s father and the rest of the family knew, Grace was perfectly happy, and that, despite the unorthodox manner of her achieving such contentment, was all that really mattered.

“Grace!” called James.

“Daddy!”

Grace, twenty-six now, appeared stronger and sturdier than ever. The suitcases appeared to weigh nothing as she swung them onto the porch. Everyone gathered around her, and James cried, “Darling, I didn’t know you were coming back for Thanksgiving.”

“I am home for good and all,” said Grace defiantly.

“No!” cried everyone. And: “Grace, what happened?!”

“Grace,” said her father, “is something wrong? What about your friend Catherine?”

“Oh, Catherine left that school year before last, Daddy! I told you that.” She sighed. “It was Mildred this time.”

“Did you two girls have an argument?” asked Queenie solicitously.

“I hate her!” cried Grace. “And I don’t want to talk about Mildred, ’cause I’m never gone see her again. If she calls and wants to speak to me, tell her I’ve moved to Baton Rouge or somewhere. Have y’all eaten? I am famished. I have driven straight through from Atlanta.”

“What did Mildred do to make you so unhappy?” asked her father. “I thought you liked that school.”

Grace pursed her lips. *"She's gone get married.* And, Daddy, I don't want to hear another word about Mildred, 'cause it just drives me crazy even to think about her. Y'all," she said to her family in general, "I loved that girl to the bottom of my soul, and now she up and tells me she is gone go off and marry some old man that sells property in Miami! So nobody ever mention her name to me again!"

"You've quit your job?" asked Elinor.

"I have. Daddy, you're gone have to support me. I am weary unto death of giving away my heart to people that don't deserve it."

"Good for you, Grace," said Queenie. "We are so glad to have you back—you cain't imagine how we have missed you. I never laid eyes on Mildred in my life, but one thing I know for sure is, she didn't deserve *you."*

No more was learned about why Grace gave up her employment at the Spartanburg girls' school, but somehow the rumor in Perdido arose that Grace had not abandoned her position voluntarily, that she had been ousted from it in some obscure but serious disgrace. Grace Caskey, though, never acted as if she had returned to Perdido in dishonor. She tackled this new stage of her life with energy and resolve. The day after her unexpected reappearance she went to the principal of the high school, showed him her certificates, and said, "Let me coach the girls' basketball team."

"We don't have one," the principal replied.

"Then I'll form one," said Grace. "And in the spring we'll talk about softball."

She formed a girls' basketball team, drilled her girls relentlessly, and then drove them all over five counties of Alabama and Florida to play other teams. She taught dancing classes at Lake Pinchona that winter, and itched for warm weather so that she could start lessons in diving and water-rescue. She put on her high boots to go rattlesnake hunting with the boys in the high school. She put on a straw hat and stood with Roxie on the Baptist Bottom bridge, fishing for bream in the lower Perdido.

"I remember," said James to Queenie, "when Grace was little, I couldn't hardly get her to sit on the back steps on a sunshiny day. She was so shy she'd run and hide anytime somebody knocked on the front door. Now I cain't even *begin* to keep up with her, and if I want her to stay in the house for five minutes, I have to rope her to the breakfront."

Grace's phenomenal energy was exceeded only by her appetite. She was in the kitchen half an hour before dinner every afternoon, fishing out pieces of chicken and getting her hand slapped by Roxie, who still thought of her as a little girl. At table, she always called for more chopped steak, more little green peas, more creamed corn, more rolls, more butter, and greedily snatched whatever was left on the serving plates when everybody else was filled to bursting. She was the first to sit down and the last to get up. She never appeared to gain weight.

At table one afternoon in mid-December of 1938, Grace at last pushed her plate away, signaled for one final glass of tea, and said, "Well, somebody tell me how Miriam's doing down at Sacred Heart."

All the Caskeys looked at one another.

"Nobody knows," answered Elinor at last.

"What do you mean?" demanded Grace. "Hasn't anybody written to her?"

"She doesn't answer," said Sister, appearing suddenly troubled.

Grace looked around astounded. "You mean that poor child went away in September, and nobody's spoken to her since?"

"How?" asked Oscar with a shrug of helplessness. "Miriam does what she wants. If Miriam wanted to speak to us, we figure she'd write or call. She didn't tell anybody where she was going until the very morning she left. Nobody wanted to interfere, Grace. But I guess," he said, looking around the table, "that maybe we've let it go a little too long..."

The fact was that Miriam reminded them all too much of Mary-Love. While none of them ever actually had said it aloud, the Caskeys, reunited after so many years of division and animosity, had not felt any great desire to have Miriam return to provoke old hostilities. Even Sister, who loved her most, had been glad that she had stayed away. However, not one of them, even for a single moment of the three months of her absence, ever worried that Miriam might not be well, or content with the lot she had chosen for herself.

"Well," said Grace, with her hands on her hips, "I have never seen or heard of the like. I want y'all to look at me." Everybody did as they were told. "When I get up from this table, I am going to drive directly down to Mobile and the Sacred Heart College and see Miriam, and I am going to ask her to her own face how she is getting along. Has anybody even *thought* to ask her if she's coming home for Christmas?"

No one had.

“Maybe...I should go with you,” said Sister tentatively.

“Maybe you should,” said Grace firmly. She rose from the table.

In five minutes, Grace and Sister were on their way to Mobile to see Miriam.

. . .

Sacred Heart College was a school run by Jesuits, located on the far western side of Mobile on about fifty acres of lawn, oak, azaleas, and cypress. Its buildings were of stodgy, scrubbed brick. The students themselves were stodgy and scrubbed—girls intensively devoted to the Roman Catholic religion, to their Jesuit teachers, and to one another. They lived three to a room in grim brick dormitories, whose chaste gray interiors were in dispiriting contrast to the intense and manicured vegetation that covered the college’s campus.

Grace easily found the Administration Building and, from a nun in the registrar’s office, got the location of Miriam’s room. Grace and Sister were gently chided for the unannounced midweek visit, which wasn’t at all customary, and which would doubtless have a disruptive effect.

“We couldn’t help it,” said Grace, uncowed. “You see, Miriam’s daddy’s sister died last night, and we have come to tell Miriam the bad news.”

Alarmed and moved, the nun summoned a gardener to show Grace and Sister across the campus to Miriam’s dormitory.

At the dormitory, the doleful news had already been received by the house mistress, and Grace and Sister were shown up to Miriam’s room directly.

“I cain’t believe,” whispered Sister fretfully, “that we have just gone and lied to a bunch of *nuns.* Telling them that I am dead!”

“Hush,” hissed Grace.

The house mistress knocked on Miriam’s door, and then respectfully retreated.

Grace didn’t wait for the knock to be answered. She opened the door, without being bidden.

In the small gray room were three narrow beds, each covered with a gray blanket; three tiny desks were topped with small green blotters; three chests-of-drawers were stacked one atop the other; and there was a standing wardrobe with double doors. On one of the beds, beneath a window, lay

Miriam, weeping convulsively against her pillow. The nun, Grace thought, must already have told her the bad news.

She looked up incredulously and gaped at Sister and Grace in the doorway.

"You poor darling!" cried Grace, holding open her arms wide.

Miriam sat tentatively up on the bed, and then after only a moment's hesitation, rushed across the room and took refuge in Grace's embrace.

"Honey," cried Sister, "I'm not dead! Grace, you shouldn't have told the nun that lie!"

"What?" stammered Miriam.

"Come hug me!" cried Sister, and took Miriam away from Grace. "They came and told you I was dead, didn't they? That's why you were crying, wasn't it?"

"No," said Miriam, mystified and still sniffling.

"Then why were you crying?" said Sister.

Miriam drew back, and looked at Grace. "Because I'm always crying," returned Miriam.

"What!" said Sister. "You never cried before in your life, Miriam! Not even when you were little and Ivey Sapp dropped you on the crown of your head!"

Miriam pulled away and retreated once more to her bed. She dried her eyes on her handkerchief. "Why are you here?" she asked.

"We came to see if you were all right," said Grace, hopping up onto one of the desks and crossing her legs beneath her. "But I can see that you're not, are you?"

"I hate it here!"

"Why!" cried Sister. "Miriam, we didn't have any idea! Why didn't you just call me and tell me you were unhappy?"

"'Cause you were so glad to get rid of me, that's why!"

"No, I wasn't! I didn't want you to leave me! I wanted to keep you with me forever and ever."

"Nobody else wanted me there in Perdido," said Miriam.

"Everybody misses you a lot," said Sister reassuringly. "Frances talks about you all the time. She is pining away."

"You were homesick, weren't you?" said Grace.

Miriam glanced at Grace sharply, then nodded her head. "Yes, very homesick."

"Then why in the world," said Sister, "didn't you come home?"

"Nobody asked me."

"Nobody had to *ask* you," cried Sister in exasperation. "Darling, that house is yours, and we're all your family. You could have come home every weekend, and we would always have been glad to see you. Ivey's dying to cook for you again. Your room is always kept ready. In fact, nobody knows what to do without you."

"I hate this old place," repeated Miriam, glancing distastefully about her room.

"You don't like your roommates?" said Grace.

"I hate them, and they hate me."

"I bet they're real sweet," said Sister vaguely. "Hey, Miriam, why didn't you come home for Thanksgiving? We had an empty chair."

"Nobody asked me."

"Lord God!" cried Sister. "What were we supposed to do, send a herald and an engraved invitation? Miriam, we are your *family*. Don't you know it?"

At last Miriam's eyes were dry. Now she was sullen.

After a few moments of glancing first at Miriam and then at Sister, Grace said energetically, "Miriam, when does your Christmas vacation begin?"

"Friday."

"All right then, Sister and I will be back then to get you. You are coming back to Perdido for the holidays—and not another word on the subject. If you have made other plans, then you break 'em, 'cause you're not getting out of this."

"A girl in my history class *had* asked me to go home with her to New Orleans," said Miriam hesitantly.

"Don't you do it," said Grace sternly. "You're coming home with us. Sister and I will be here on Friday."

"I don't need you," said Miriam. "I've got my car. I'll be in Perdido by suppertime."

"Sister and I will come down anyway," said Grace. "We've got some Christmas shopping to do down here, and we'll drop by here to help you pack up."

To be thus taken in hand and ordered to come to Perdido seemed exactly what Miriam wanted. She ventured a smile, and said she was glad

that Grace and Sister had come to see her. She offered to show them around the campus, and after that brief tour she introduced her relatives to her roommates. There was some awkwardness in maintaining the deception of a dead relative in the light of Miriam's obviously improved temper. When questioned about this by one of the nuns, Grace explained boldly, "False alarm. It was just a stroke, and we hear that she's much better now."

That evening, Grace and Miriam and Sister went out to dinner together at the Government House in downtown Mobile, and there Miriam shamefacedly admitted the harrowing extent of her homesickness. "I cried every night before I went to bed, and I cried every morning when I got up. I never thought I could miss old Perdido so much, and everybody there. I used to daydream about walking along the levee, and buying bobby pins down at the Ben Franklin."

"Honey, I wish you'd called or written and told us how miserable you were," said Sister plaintively.

"She's just like Mary-Love," said Grace abruptly. "And it's always somebody else who has to make the first step. Miriam, you know that's how you are, and Mary-Love taught you some bad lessons. It's about time you got over a little of that."

Sister was certain that this straightforward talk would inflame Miriam, who was very touchy on the subject of her dead grandmother, but Miriam, apparently chastened by her unhappiness, only replied, "I sure will be glad to sleep in my own bed. I am sick to death of having to share everything. And after New Year's, I know I'm gone dread leaving Perdido again."

Chapter 47

The Causeway

Miriam had learned a hard lesson during her three-month sojourn at Sacred Heart College. She had discovered that she was not as strong and independent as she had thought. From the first night she had been assailed by loneliness, homesickness, insecurity, and unhappiness. She had liked nothing about Sacred Heart: its buildings, its grounds, its teachers, its students. All were strange to her. The nuns were threatening. The girls in the dormitory all seemed privy to a secret about life that Miriam could not figure out. Despite what she told her family, she had decided against converting to Catholicism. The more she saw of that religion, the less it agreed with her. Though she never would have admitted it, even to herself, Miriam wasn't entirely sure why she had chosen Sacred Heart over any other school. Perhaps because it was so close to Perdido—even though she had left home with the intention of returning only infrequently. Perhaps because only women went there—to prevent the family from having any satisfaction in imagining that she even remotely contemplated marriage. Perhaps only because, of all colleges, Sacred Heart had seemed unlikeliest for her.

Even in her first days there, she missed Perdido. Often she thought of the house in which she had grown up. She thought about her room and Mary-Love's room and Sister's room. She thought of Ivey in the kitchen, and longed to hear Luvadia's rake scratching patterns in the sandy yard. She wanted to hear the creak of the rotting water oak limbs outside her window. She thought of the Perdido, flowing always swiftly, always turbulently behind its protective wall of red clay. She wanted, from the moment she set foot on the Sacred Heart campus, to be back in Perdido, to live as she had always lived. She was desperate for Sister's company, and she missed Oscar and Elinor and Frances on one side of the house, and James and Danjo on the other. Once, Miriam went downtown to one of the banks in Mobile, and opened her safety-deposit box and examined the diamonds and sapphires that were hidden within it, but the jewels proved of no comfort. She shut the box and returned to the dormitory to cry.

Miriam never even considered returning to Perdido for the weekend, even though Perdido was less than fifty miles away, no more than an hour and a half's drive in the roadster. Though she missed them woefully, and realized for the first time how much she loved them, Miriam still thought of her family as the enemy. This was her grandmother's teaching, and a lesson by which only Miriam suffered. She waited for some sign of capitulation: a telephone call from Sister to say she was desperately missed, a postcard from Frances to ask when she was coming home, a frantic telegram to demand her presence at Thanksgiving dinner, an ostensibly casual visit from James and Queenie at the tag end of one of their Mobile shopping excursions. Hearing nothing, she concluded that her family had won, and that she had lost. Grace's visit seemed heaven-sent and Miriam prayed thanks to the God of her classmates.

In the last few days before Christmas vacation began, however, Miriam grew anxious. She perceived that she would be returning in a state of disgrace—and vulnerability. Grace would have told everyone that she had nearly collapsed beneath the weight of homesickness, that she had been desperate for news of home, that she had missed everyone—even her mother and father. Miriam declined Sister and Grace's offer to return to the college and assist her in packing. With great misgivings she drove back to Perdido through the gathering dusk.

She pulled up before the house, got out, carried her bag inside, and called Sister's name. No one was home.

At Sacred Heart, Miriam had suffered a nightmare. In her dream, she had given up her pride and returned to Perdido, only to find that her family had abandoned the three houses along the river and departed without leaving word of their whereabouts. In the gloom of twilight in the empty house the nightmare seemed to have become reality and Miriam trembled. She ran outside, out the back door, and stood dwarfed and trembling beneath the towering water oaks.

"Miriam!" Sister's voice came from above. Miriam looked up. Sister stood at the screens of Oscar and Elinor's upstairs porch. "Everybody's over here, darling!"

Thinking, *They've won, they've won,* Miriam entered her parents' house. Zaddie appeared as a dark shadow in the even darker hallway, and said, "Hey, Miss Miriam, how you?"

“Fine, Zaddie. Just fine,” she replied, and slowly climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Everyone was there on the screened porch: her parents, Sister, Frances, Danjo and James and Grace, Queenie and Lucille.

“Hey, y’all,” said Miriam softly. “I’m back.”

No one crowed triumph.

Her mother said quietly, “Miriam, Grace said you had an invitation to go off with one of your friends, but we are truly pleased that you decided to spend Christmas with us...”

“We are all having supper together over here...in your honor,” said Oscar tentatively, “’cause we are all so glad to see you again, darling.”

No more was said about her return. No one pressed its ignominy back upon her; no one trod upon her prostrate spirit.

Miriam sat down in the swing beside Frances, who in a quick, apprehensive motion leaned over and hugged her. Miriam tried to gather her thoughts and think this thing out. She looked over at Grace.

Grace said, “Miriam, when I told everybody that you had decided to come back here for Christmas they were so excited, I cain’t tell you!”

That was it then; Grace and Sister had said nothing of her homesickness nor her dire unhappiness at Sacred Heart. She had been defeated by her own emotions and weakness, but no one except Grace and Sister knew it.

Queenie asked her how she liked Sacred Heart.

“It takes some...getting used to,” replied Miriam carefully. “I never knew there were so many Catholics before. Some of the mill workers are Catholic—aren’t they, Oscar?—but I wasn’t used to *everybody* praying to the Virgin, and people telling rosary beads and tacking up little cards with pictures of the crucifixion on them. All of that makes me a little nervous. I’m still not used to it.”

Miriam soon discovered that in her absence considerable changes had been wrought in the family. She found that she was expected to go to her parents’ house every day for the midday meal, and that her former recalcitrance in the matter wasn’t to be indulged. She bridled the first few days to think that she was to converse with her father and mother, with whom she had had almost nothing to do all of her life. But then she realized that they were treating *her* differently.

For the first time, suddenly and radically, Miriam was being regarded as an adult. She had an equal place with Sister, and a greater place, it seemed, than either Frances or Lucille.

Miriam wasn't certain how this promotion had come about.

. . .

What Miriam didn't suspect—and never found out—was that Grace and Sister *had* told the Caskeys everything. Everyone knew that Miriam had suffered badly with homesickness, had cried herself to sleep every night, had felt hatred for Sacred Heart and disgust with everything that was not of Perdido. The Caskeys were touched by the revelation. No one had suspected Miriam had such sensitivity; and when she returned for the Christmas holidays, no one threw it in her face.

By New Year's, Miriam knew that in a week she must either return to Sacred Heart or declare her intention never to leave Perdido. So far as she knew, no one in her family knew her detestation of the place and her love for her home. She could not now suddenly say, I was miserable at Sacred Heart, and I don't want to go back. Her family wouldn't know what to think, but leaving Perdido again—when Perdido was sweeter than ever to her—seemed an equally impossible course.

Her father solved her problem. On New Year's Day, as the plates of turkey and pheasant and ham were being passed around the dinner table, Oscar said to his daughter, "Miriam, I wish to God you wouldn't leave us. I have never seen so much of you as in the past few weeks, and it's gone break my heart to see you go back to that college."

"I got to go, Oscar," replied Miriam weakly.

"Not if you don't want to," said Sister. "It's important these days for a girl to have a college education, nobody knows that better than I do, but I wish for once you'd give up your selfish ways and think of me, Miriam. I'm so lonely without you." Sister could now confidently speak of loneliness without anyone pointing out that she might, as a solution, return to her husband in Chattanooga.

Miriam didn't know what to say. Now that the way had been paved for her staying—now that her family had, in its way, capitulated and begged the mercy of her continued presence in their midst—it began to seem to Miriam that her months at Sacred Heart hadn't been *so* bad. She had been unhappy, she had cried herself to sleep and awoke each morning with dried tears welding shut her eyes; yet her grades hadn't suffered, and she had liked

being so near to the amenities of Mobile. Only with her family asking her to remain in Perdido did returning to Sacred Heart become a possibility.

"Miriam, you remember how last summer we drove to Pensacola every morning?" said Frances tentatively.

"I remember," said Miriam absently.

"Well," Frances went on, "Mobile's not any farther away. Why don't you just drive down there every day? It only takes about an hour."

"It takes longer," said Miriam, looking up with interest now. "'Cause Sacred Heart's on the far side of town."

"You could still do it," said Sister excitedly. "You could live at home, drive down to Mobile every morning, and be back in time for supper. I could get Ivey to stay on later, and make you something hot."

"I could do that," said Ivey, coming in from the kitchen at that moment with a dish of creamed corn. "I'd be happy to cook for you, Miss Miriam."

Oscar said, "It's settled then. You're not gone leave us. You're gone drive down to school in the morning and come back in the evening. You will sleep in your own bed and you will keep us all happy."

"This is gone be a whole lot of trouble for me," said Miriam.

"We don't care one bit," said Sister. "You are gone let us impose on you, and we don't care *how* much trouble you're gone have to go through."

. . .

The administration of the college said no to Miriam's request to live at home. Miriam, desolate, went to her room and wept. She tearfully telephoned Sister to say that all was off.

Grace appeared at the college at eight o'clock the following morning and spoke to the provost. She told him that Miriam was needed at home in the evening to care for her aunt and guardian who was ill—still recovering from her stroke—and would have no one but Miriam about her. Otherwise, for the sake of the aunt, Miriam would have to be withdrawn from the school. The provost gave in. Miriam packed her bags, shook hands with her roommates, and raced back to Perdido.

Every morning Miriam drove her roadster down to Mobile, attended her classes, and returned home by four or five o'clock in the afternoon. Some days she was home in time for midday dinner. She never complained of the trip, though everyone thought she probably would soon get bored with it. Sometimes Grace or Sister or even her mother rode with her, and spent the day shopping in Mobile. Miriam, though still often abrasive and

short, became accustomed to being with her family, and could manage now to sit through a whole meal without growing huffy or taking offense at someone's innocent remark. Her dead grandmother's influence was waning.

She saw no reason to alter her situation during her sophomore year at the college. One day she suggested to her sister Frances, then a senior in the Perdido high school, that she go to Sacred Heart as well. "As long as I'm driving down there every day, you might as well come too."

Frances was delighted with the offer. She had thought of the plan herself, but had not dared put the question to Miriam for fear of an abrupt refusal. Elinor and Oscar were pleased. They still thought of their daughter as frail and dependent. It would be a comfort to them to know that in her first difficult years at college France would have Miriam so near. Oscar was a little uneasy that Frances might not withstand conversion to Catholicism as Miriam had, but Elinor assured him that Frances would hold on staunchly to her Methodist principles. Frances applied to Sacred Heart and was accepted. In the autumn of 1940, the roadster's passenger seat was occupied each day by Frances.

It was odd to Frances that, while it was always over the same route, their journey to Mobile in the mornings should be so different from the late afternoon trip home. Leaving Perdido, the road first wound through pine forest—much of it owned by the Caskeys themselves—and then into Bay Minette, the county seat of Baldwin County. The highway led on down to Pine Haven and Stapleton, bleak hamlets occupied mainly by pecan and potato farmers, and then across to Bridgehead. Then there was a wondrously long, straight causeway on either side of which lay marshes, rivers, and islands, all fading imperceptibly one into the other in the early morning light. Rivers were a mile wide here, their sources no more than ten miles upstream. There were vast islands of grass scarcely two feet above the level of the water, where fishermen often disappeared. On both sides of the blacktopped road were vistas of nothing but pink sky, blue water, and green marsh grass. The Blakeley River faded into Dacke Bay which in turn became the Apalachee River. The boundaries were nebulous between all these bodies of water—Chacaloochee Bay, the Tensaw River, Delvan Bay, and the Mobile River.

On those rides to Mobile, begun before either of the sisters was well awake, Frances stared at the water and the sky and the grass, and was reminded not only of the summer she and Miriam had spent on the beach at

Pensacola, but of earlier times, hazy times in her past and in her childhood, and of times that, impossibly, lay even further back, before there *was* a Frances Caskey. The top of the car was always down, and the loud wind prevented conversation. The smell of the salt marsh, where all these rivers, estuaries, and streams emptied into the great maw of Mobile Bay, filled Frances's brain. Without actually sleeping, she seemed to dream. The pink sky was bright and empty. The water below was blue and torpid. The wind became a song, without notes or melody or words, but with pitches and rhythms that were wholly familiar to her.

In her dreams, Frances saw the secret things that swam out of sight below the surface of the bright water and stared greedily up at the automobile passing along the causeway. Frances dreamed of what hid in the low grass of the insubstantial marshy islands, and what dead things lay twisted and broken in the ancient mud. She dreamed of what bones were buried in hummocks, saw what tore fishermen's nets, and understood why fishermen themselves sometimes disappeared.

She woke—or ceased to dream—when the roadster emerged from the tunnel that ran beneath the last tendril of the segmented Mobile River. She turned and smiled, and always said, "Oh, we're here already..."

The return trip to Perdido late in the day was different. Clouds defiled the purity of the sky, already darkening in the east ahead of them. The marshes, bays, rivers, and hummocks of grass seemed dirty and sodden. The small towns of Baldwin County were crowded, noisy, and crass. Even the pine forest was dusty and wearying. On the trip home Frances never dreamed, and never remembered what she had dreamed in the morning.

In the evenings she always felt that something was missing, and she longed for the hours to pass, and for dawn to come again. Then in the morning, as Miriam drove over the causeway, Frances would again dream of what lay beneath the surface of the blue trembling water.

Chapter 48

Mobilization

Perdido gave scant thought to the war in Europe; the town was for the Allies, against the Axis, and that was that. Perdido was preoccupied with the upward struggle from the severe and repeated assaults of the Depression. Then, like the stunning surprise of a blow to the back of the head, the National Guard was mobilized in November of 1940. One hundred and seventeen young Perdido men were notified that they might be instantly called away. One of the old dormitories below Baptist Bottom that had been used to house levee workers was quickly converted into an armory, and those one hundred and seventeen mill workers, layabouts, and high school seniors congregated there every morning in expectation of marching orders. Christmas and New Year's passed, but no orders came.

Oscar was grateful that no call for the men had yet come; he needed his workers. During the Depression he had provided employment in Perdido that was far beyond the actual manpower needs of the Caskey mills and factories. In recent months, however, activity had picked up sharply. The War Department had placed orders for vast quantities of lumber and posts. Oscar learned that the new Camp Rucca was being built in the Alabama Wiregrass. He heard that Eglin Field, the air base over the Florida line, was tripling its size. Oscar placed notices in the Perdido *Standard* and in the newspapers of Atmore, Brewton, Bay Minette, Jay, Pensacola, and Mobile offering work to those men not yet put on active alert. Some came, but not as many as he had hoped. Many Baldwin and Escambia county boys had already been sent away. Every morning, as he was shaved in the barber's chair, Oscar considered what he could do: hire high school boys in the afternoon, employ women in the lighter jobs that before had been held by men, and promote colored men into jobs that were presently denied them. These strategies were not yet necessary, and only Oscar anticipated a time when they *would* be required.

Oscar had lost some of his buoyancy. The death of Mary-Love and the retirement of James had placed the management of the mill squarely and exclusively upon his shoulders. He had at once to deal with an expanded operation and declining receipts. He was no longer youthful, for that matter,

nearly forty-five now, with two daughters in college, and the responsibility for an industry on which the well-being of the entire town was dependent. He had settled into a narrow, strictured life, hemmed in by his family and by the mill. He loved his family, and he was proud of the mill, but sometimes he looked about and wondered. Sometimes his eyes fell upon his wife, and he thought, *Who is she?*

Elinor had changed, most noticeably since the death of Mary-Love. She was a good deal calmer now, less prone to fits of anger; she seemed less dangerous. She hadn't the destructive instincts he had seen in her before. There had been times, Oscar knew, when his wife had been motivated by a kind of unselfish greed—that is, greed for his and Frances's sake, more than for her own. The wellsprings of that loving avarice seemed to have lost some of their strength recently. Oscar occasionally thought of the future of the mill as he and Elinor lay in bed at night, and he would ask Elinor's opinion. He wanted to know what she would do in his place; he wanted to hear what people in town thought about this and that. But Elinor's interest in such conversations had waned. In fact, her interest in nearly everything had diminished to such an extent that Oscar became alarmed, and he suggested that she visit Leo Benquith and get a prescription. He was certain that something was the matter with her.

"Elinor," he asked one night, turning toward her in the darkness. "Tell me something. How old are you?"

"You have never asked me that question before," returned Elinor. "Why are you asking me now?"

Oscar hesitated. "You've been acting so funny, I thought you were pregnant."

Elinor laughed, but her laugh was small and weak.

"I've been thinking," said Elinor.

It suddenly occurred to Oscar that his wife had only been waiting for such a question from him to enable her to speak about something that had oppressed her spirit for some time.

"Thinking about what?" her husband asked gently.

"I was thinking about Miriam and how homesick she got when she first went away to school."

"She sure did. And she didn't let on, either."

"I'm homesick, too, Oscar," said Elinor in a small voice, and wound her arms around her husband's neck in a kind of cold desperation.

“Elinor,” he cried in surprise, “I don’t believe you have mentioned Wade once in fifteen years.”

Elinor paused. “I’ve thought about it a lot, though.”

“Do you have any people who are still alive? I know you never hear from them.”

“There’s not many of us left, that’s true. And we never were big on letters or the telephone.”

“Then why don’t you just drive on up there and visit with them a spell?”

“I think I might do just that,” said Elinor.

“It might do you some good to get away from here. I think you’ve been cooped up. Perdido’s so small. And it’s been so long since you were home...”

“It has been,” sighed Elinor. “I miss it too. I’ve been feeling tired lately, peaked, and maybe all I need to get my strength back up is to go home for a little while.”

“I wish I could go with you—”

“You can’t, Oscar, you’re too busy with the mill,” said Elinor hastily.

“I know, so take somebody else. Take Sister or Grace or James. I know we’d all like to meet your family. You never talk about them, so I just always forget that you have a family. Somehow I had it in my head that they were all dead.”

“As I said, there are some left,” said Elinor. “But I think I want to go up there alone.”

“You want to get away from us all, don’t you? I don’t blame you one little bit for that. We’re all pretty wearing, aren’t we?”

Elinor laughed, and hugged her husband close. There wasn’t as much desperation in her embrace now, but her arms around him still felt damp and cold.

. . .

Next morning at the barbershop, Oscar thought not about the mill but about his wife. He was pleased to think he had pressed the trigger of her secret—her homesickness for Wade in Fayette County. Of all things that might have depressed or saddened Elinor, absence from her family and early home was the last he would ever have considered. He would see that she got away soon, because he wanted no delay in the recovery of her spirits and energy.

When he went home for dinner at noon, he thought, he would encourage her to leave that very week; there was nothing keeping her in Perdido.

When he reached home at noon, he was startled to discover that, without a word, Elinor had already left. Zaddie said, "She got out a suitcase, that small one. She sent Bray off to fill up the car with gas. She told me what all to do while she was gone. And then she took off. I said, 'Miss Elinor, don't you want some chicken?' and she said, 'Zaddie, I'm just *dying* to get home.' She wasn't gone wait for nothing, Mr. Oscar."

"I cain't believe it," said Oscar in amazement. "She didn't even say goodbye."

Zaddie repeated her story for the other members of the family as each arrived for the noontime meal. The Caskeys were perplexed, and every few moments Zaddie was called into the dining room to answer another puzzling question.

"Zaddie, did she call up to Wade first to see if anyone was gone be home?" asked Queenie.

"Did she leave a number where we can get in touch with her?" asked Grace.

"Or an address, so we could send a telegram?" queried James.

"Or did she even say what the people's names were?" wondered Oscar. "I guess maybe they're Dammerts, but I don't think I ever even heard Elinor say for sure. They could be her mama's people, and we never would know how to get in touch with them." He looked around the table. "Has anybody ever been to Wade?"

The Caskeys all shook their heads.

"I never even heard of the place till Elinor said she came from there," said James. "And I had forgot all about it till just now. Who would have thought that Elinor still had any family to go and visit? I don't believe she has mentioned them even once in the past twenty years."

"All I can say," said Sister, "is that she must have been awfully anxious to get up there if she left without saying goodbye to anybody but Zaddie. Oscar, you sure she didn't stop by the mill on her way out of town?"

"I'm sure she didn't," said Oscar.

"She went in the other direction," said Zaddie from the kitchen. "Out toward the Old Federal Road."

Everyone was astounded. “That won’t take her anywhere!” cried James. “I hope she had a map with her, ’cause that Old Federal Road just fades out...”

. . .

No one could make anything of it. They had no way of getting in touch with Elinor should an emergency arise, and they had no idea of when she intended to return. She had given no indication of the length of her stay. Every day the Caskeys hoped for her reappearance, and nightly Oscar went to bed alone and disappointed. After a week, Grace volunteered to drive up to Wade—wherever in the world it was—and find Elinor, but Oscar said, “No, I don’t want you to do that. Elinor’s all right, I’m not worried about her. She wanted to get away from us for a bit. After twenty years, I don’t hold that against her. We’re not gone go traipsing up there and drag her back like we cain’t do without her.”

“I *cain’t* do without her, Daddy,” protested Frances. “I miss her so much!”

“I know, darling, and so do I,” Oscar sighed.

. . .

In the middle of the second week of Elinor’s absence, during an unseasonably warm week in January of 1941, the National Guardsmen received word that in two days more they would be sent down to Camp Blanding on the Atlantic coast of Florida for basic training. The boys and men had two days to put their affairs in order, to say their goodbyes, and to go out and get good and drunk.

On the afternoon of the day before they were to go off at six the following morning, two high school seniors, next-door neighbors and friends all their lives, who were now being plucked from the middle of their schooling and their infatuations with girls, drove over the Florida line, and with a one-dollar bribe, purchased a case of twenty-four bottles of Budweiser beer.

Upon returning to Perdido, fearful of being seen by parents or other adults likely to be disapproving of their alcoholic indulgence, they drove around the town to the north and parked their automobile in the grove of live oaks just above the junction of the Perdido and Blackwater rivers. They immediately proceeded to open bottles and to guzzle them down. On their third round, one of the boys was overcome with the need to relieve himself. He climbed out of the car and went over to one of the live oaks. Standing

there, urinating on one of the outermost drooping limbs, he caught sight of something shining and metallic within the curtain of branches and leaves. When he had buttoned up, he pushed aside the limbs and went under the living umbrella that the ancient live oak had produced. To his astonishment, he discovered an automobile. A small suitcase lay on the back seat, and the keys remained in the ignition. In his beer-befuddled state he tried to solve the mystery of the unoccupied car's presence in this spot.

His protracted absence drew his friend, but the friend could provide no explanation either. In hope of finding some clue to the owner of the vehicle, and emboldened by the consumption of three bottles of Budweiser, the boys opened the suitcase. It was empty.

"The car's stolen," said the boy who had discovered it. "It's bound to be stolen, and the thief left it here."

"If he was just leaving it and going off, then why would he bother to hide it?" his friend asked.

"Maybe there's a body in the trunk."

Not even the thought that tomorrow they would be formally inducted into the army provided courage sufficient to test *that* hypothesis.

The boys stumbled nervously out from beneath the tree and returned to their car. They consumed four more bottles of beer in an attempt to forget about the automobile hidden under the tree, and six more than that in drunkenly trying to predict what military life would have in store for them. As the sun lowered in the sky, the boys fell unconscious in the car. They hoped to wake sober.

. . .

Early next morning three buses parked in front of the town hall, and one hundred fifteen men climbed on. Most of Perdido was there to see them off. The occasion was suddenly marred, however, by the announcement that two high school seniors were missing. No other conscripted men in all of Baldwin County had failed to appear. It was perceived as a black mark against the town that these two boys had deserted. Their parents, shamed and fretful, returned to their homes, faintly maintaining that some accident had befallen the boys; that some irreproachable necessity had kept them away.

The Caskeys had joined their fellow townspeople at the town hall, and after the buses had driven off to a lackluster cheering, they also returned home. To their immense surprise, Elinor's automobile was parked in front

of her house, and Elinor herself was sitting on the front porch, waiting for them. Oscar's step quickened, as Frances actually ran toward her mother. Elinor caught her daughter in her arms, and lifted her off the ground.

"Oh, Mama, I missed you so much! We didn't know *when* you were coming back, and I looked out the window about fifty million times hoping I would see you come driving up."

"Well," laughed Elinor, "I'm back now, darling."

"You look wonderful," said Frances, somewhat surprised, as she drew back from her mother and looked carefully into her face.

Oscar and the others had reached the steps of the house by now.

"You *do* look wonderful," said Oscar. Elinor came down the steps and kissed her husband. Everyone fought for the opportunity to hug her.

"I *feel* wonderful," said Elinor. "I feel like I could take on the whole German army."

"It looks like this trip did you a world of good," said James.

"What'd you do up in Wade, Mama?" asked Frances.

"Nothing. Not a single thing. I just went home and sat around. I didn't do a thing in the world. I was just so glad to get rid of all of you for two weeks, that's all." She laughed merrily. Oscar wondered how long it had been since he had heard his wife so lighthearted.

"How was your family?" asked Sister.

"Oh, fine," replied Elinor vaguely. "There's not many of them left, and we don't get along so well anymore."

"Why not?" asked Grace.

"Oh, because they think I went off and deserted them when I came down here and married Oscar, that's why. Most of 'em never leave home, and I was one of 'em who did. They got mad, that's all."

"Are they still mad?" asked Oscar curiously. Elinor had *never* spoken of her family.

"Of course," she returned with a smile. "But for two weeks, I didn't care. They could say whatever they wanted. I was just glad to be home for a while."

. . .

Elinor seemed to have regained all her energy and drive. Now she was never still, she was never unhappy, and she was never without some project or other. She set Bray to building up a new camellia bed in the back of the house, despite his protestation that nothing would grow in the sand. She

bought new furniture for the downstairs rooms. She ran up curtains for the second floor of Miriam and Sister's house without their having said they needed them. She talked to Oscar ceaselessly about the coming war's probable effect on business, and she drove all around the county knocking on doors and asking if anyone needed employment at the mill. She sometimes went with Frances and Miriam to Mobile and shopped all day while they were in school. She and Zaddie cleaned the house, and threw out everything that hadn't been used in the past two years. She drove Leo Benquith out to the Sapps and made him examine and treat every one of the Sapp children and grandchildren for the diseases that were common to impoverished country families. She went with Queenie to visit Dollie Faye Crawford out on the Bay Minette road. She offered to teach Lucille how to sew on a machine. She made fruitcakes to send to Malcolm who was stationed in New Jersey. Her high spirits seemed to infect the whole family.

The news from Europe grew worse and worse, and the War Department placed more and more orders with Oscar's office. For the first time since 1926 the Caskey mill operated at near capacity. Beneath all life in Perdido there was a low-pitched hum of activity. It might have been the mill machinery cutting lumber and chips, fashioning poles and posts, doorjambs and window frames. Or it might have been the Perdido, nearly forgotten behind its walls of red clay, spilling along with its old urgency, its old inexorability, tumbling leaves and sticks and bones down to the junction, and burying them in the mud at the bottom of the river.

The one hundred fifteen Perdido boys finished basic training late in April, and then were scattered around the country. Most ended up in Michigan, some in Missouri, and a few were sent to help in the building of Camp Rucca. The two high school seniors were never found. A week after they were to have left for basic training, however, their automobile, with a half case of unopened Budweiser beer in the back, was discovered in the grove of live oaks on the uninhabited side of the junction.

Chapter 49

Rationing

Lucille and Queenie didn't even know where Pearl Harbor was when they heard the news over the radio on Sunday afternoon; few people in Perdido did. Everyone, though, knew what the Japanese bombing meant to the country. All afternoon people went from house to house, and said things like: "I wonder what's gone come of us now." War was indisputable. How Perdido would be affected was a much-discussed question.

Three days after the declaration of war, gasoline was rationed. Because of their ownership of an industry considered vital to the defense of the nation, each of the Caskey households was awarded a "C" classification, entitling them to fifteen gallons of gasoline a week. Sugar rationing followed in short order. Later, shoes and meat were placed under containment. All citizens were required to register at the town hall in order to receive their coupons, and revelation of age was necessary. The privacy of Perdido women had never been so infringed upon before, and despite the pleas for patriotism, not one admitted to years beyond fifty-five—even those who frequently had been heard to draw up some remembrance of the Civil War.

With a sudden bound, the country's economy was on its feet again, as Oscar had predicted. The office of the Caskey mill was filled with defense orders. Frances and Miriam, on Saturdays and Sundays, went to the mill to help their father sort through his work. Frances was as much hindrance as help, but Miriam understood the business instinctively, though she had rarely even visited the mill. In one of the company trucks—so as not to waste their personal allotment of gasoline—Elinor and Queenie drove through the countryside, stopping every man they saw and offering him work at the Caskey mills.

All the new military bases were being constructed of wood. At Camp Rucca three thousand men were living in tents. Barracks needed to be raised as quickly as possible. Oscar often was able to deliver lumber on the day after it was formally requested. Eglin Field, down near Pensacola, had begun its expansion. Oscar got that contract, too. Thousands of miles of

electric lines were being strung across the country, and Oscar's plant manufactured utility poles quicker and better than anyone else.

Oscar was devilishly busy. He had not only to cope with mounting paperwork, but had to learn to deal with the military. This was quite different from his previous business experience, which had been transacted with less exacting but more knowledgeable civilians. At a time when every patriotic man had enlisted, and every poor man had gone in for the twenty-one dollars a month with room and board, and every other man had been drafted, Oscar sought workers to staff a second shift. He made inspection tours of the Caskey forests to determine order of cutting; and because he knew more about the matter than anyone else, he had to supervise replanting.

Life in Perdido changed quickly. There was now full employment, and the mill ached for more workers. Many of the women in town found employment building Liberty ships at the shipyards in Pensacola and Mobile. Every morning at six o'clock, two buses left from the town hall filled with excited Perdido wives who never had held jobs. There was intense activity wholly unprecedented in this quiet corner of rural Alabama. So much money came in from the defense contracts that Oscar saw fit to raise salaries across the board twice in the first six months of the war. The workers shared their newfound income with Perdido. Stores that had closed at the beginning of the Depression opened again and instantly thrived.

Even Baptist Bottom saw improvement. Black men worked at the mill or had joined the army. Black women took over the running of white households where husband and wife were both off working. Black girls as young as thirteen were pressed into responsible service.

From the beginning, Oscar made money. He had not anticipated that prosperity would be dependent upon the declaration of war, but nevertheless the Caskey mills *were* prepared, and in that readiness there was considerable profit.

Sister and James no longer had to come to Oscar for pin money. With increasing frequency, Oscar presented his uncle and his sister with checks for several hundred dollars. Later he was giving them several thousands. James and Sister stared at the drafts, and endorsed them with surprised and shaky hands.

"Oscar," said Sister at dinner one evening, "when I was little, and then when I was living with Early, I didn't know much about the mill. Nobody

would ever tell me a thing. But we never made money like this, did we? Mama had it piled up and stashed away, I know, but it never came in this quick and easy, did it? Every time I turn around you are handing me a check."

James replied to Sister, "No, it *never* came this easy or this fast. And it's not just the war either. It's what Oscar did *before* the war. Oscar, did you know all this was gone happen?"

"Sort of," said Oscar with a little discomfort. "I knew *something* was gone happen. Actually, the one to thank is Elinor."

Elinor nodded a small acknowledgement of her husband's praise.

"What'd *you* do?" asked Sister.

"Elinor was always at me to expand the plant, to get things set up right, even when I was reaching into capital to do it. It took something for me to get over that—you know how Mama was about people using their capital. Expand, improve, build up, get new equipment, buy more land—Elinor just harped and harped on me about it."

Sister and James turned to Elinor. "Then you knew about the war."

"No," said Elinor, as if she really didn't mean it. "I just knew what was right for Oscar and the mill."

"We are getting rich, I'm telling y'all that right now," Oscar went on. "And what's making us rich is that we have all that land. Every time five acres came up for sale Elinor was on to me about it. She'd say, 'Oscar, go get it.' And I'd do it, just to shut her up. You know, there's those mills up in Atmore and Brewton, and if they had the trees they could get the contracts like I do. But they don't have the trees, and every time an order comes in they got to go pretty far afield, they got to go *looking* for timber. In the last ten years they've been cutting back, they even sold some of their land to me, and now they're being brought up short. They all thought I was crazy to sink money into land."

"I thought you were crazy, too," admitted James.

"Yes," nodded Sister. "But you and Elinor proved James and me wrong, thank goodness. There have been times when I wasn't sure I was gone be able to pay Miriam's schooling."

"Good Lord, Sister," said James, "in another couple of months, we're gone have enough money to buy that whole damn college..."

. . .

Queenie Strickland's friendship with Dollie Faye Crawford had been sincere; she had not sought it only in order to assure favorable testimony when Malcolm's case came to trial. After Malcolm had gone away to join the army, Queenie's visits to the country store continued, and Queenie began shopping there, as did James and Elinor. It was an unheard of thing for the richest family in town to stock its pantry out of a ramshackle little place out in the country, but the Caskeys didn't care for Perdido's opinion. The family wanted to continue to make up for the shock Dollie Faye had suffered when confronted by Malcolm Strickland and Travis Gann with shotguns.

As a result of this new and somewhat extraordinary clientele, Dollie Faye stocked better merchandise. With money from James Caskey, she built a smokehouse out in back; she soon added a slaughterhouse, and got the son of a neighboring farmer to preside over its operations. Other Perdido residents made the trek out to the store on the Bay Minette road when it became known that Mrs. Crawford supplied the best bacon and pork in the county. Elinor lent Dollie Faye a thousand dollars. Oscar sent over four carpenters for a week's work making improvements on the store.

Dollie Faye was aware that the Caskeys were the source of her newfound prosperity, and she made sure, despite rationing, that they never suffered. She made surreptitious telephone calls each time a hog was about to be slaughtered, and Queenie or Elinor or Sister was out at the store in time to hear the pig squealing. Sugar was so plentiful for the Caskeys that Elinor continued to make her fruitcakes. Sugar, in any case, would have been no problem, for Ivey and Zaddie and Luvadia had as much cane sugar as they wanted from their mother's farm out beyond the Old Federal Road. Dollie Faye had trouble only with shoes and with tires. Oscar could usually manage the latter with his newly formed connections with the military, and occasionally, in the company of a colonel or two, he was allowed to make purchases at the military provision stores on the Eglin base, and bought shoes there.

When the war began, Early Haskew was hired by the War Department as a civilian engineer. He was given a substantial salary and immediately sent to Washington. He telephoned Sister to tell her this news. She was genuinely happy for Early. She had been separated from her husband for so long that she now thought of him like an old friend. The news of an old friend obtaining a lucrative and important position pleased her. She was

also happy that the transfer was taking Early just that much farther away. In his official capacity, he got hold of extra ration coupons, stuck them in envelopes and mailed them to Sister. The Caskeys were well provided for in this time that proved difficult and tragic for so many.

In fact, Perdido as a whole suffered less than many parts of the country. The town was scarcely out of the Depression yet, and many of the boys who went off to the army did so with a willingness exceeding duty to country. Sustenance and shelter and pocket money were surer things in a uniform in Michigan than they were in a falling-down forest shack in rural Baldwin County. Much of the land around Perdido was Caskey forest, but there were small farmers here and there, some black, some Indian, some impoverished white—people who resented governmental attempts to regulate any part of their lives. Their animals were slaughtered in private, their crops gathered in the first hours of the morning before agents were likely to be out on the road. In answering those agents' questions, the farmers would protest that bad weather, insects, and marauding animals had decimated their crops. Their dirt-streaked children sold vegetables out of mule wagons driven slowly along the residential streets of Perdido. Out of sight in a closed box were slabs of bacon, beef steaks wrapped in brown paper, and chickens with wrung necks.

The Caskeys feared that, because of the curtailment of gasoline to civilians, Miriam and Frances would have to move into the dormitories of Sacred Heart. The family pooled their allotments of coupons so that, with care, the two daughters might finish out at least the remainder of the semester. Miriam would then graduate, and the question become moot for her; but Frances, returning to school the following autumn, would have to resign herself to leaving her home.

One chilly morning early in March, half an hour before the sun had risen, Miriam and Frances were driving out of Perdido, on their way to seven-thirty classes. As they neared Crawford's store, Miriam said, "Frances, isn't that Miz Crawford standing out in front of her store with a lantern?" Frances roused herself from her usual reverie, peered ahead, and replied, "Sure is. Slow down."

In the darkness, Miriam pulled up in the red clay drive of the store.

"Hey, Miz Crawford," said Frances, "is there something wrong?"

"No, ma'am," replied Dollie Faye. "I just thought you might be low on gas this morning."

“We can get to Mobile and back,” said Miriam. “And I didn’t bring any coupons.”

“Let me fill it up for you,” said Dollie Faye, taking the nozzle from the pump. “You can give me the coupon some other time.”

“Hey, Mr. Crawford,” said Frances, waving at Dial. The old man slumped up off the bench and came forward with a wet rag to wipe off the windshield.

Dial Crawford stared at her and mumbled incoherently.

“Sir?” asked Frances, not understanding a word he said.

“Don’t mind him,” called Dollie Faye from the back of the car. “You be quiet, Dial!”

The man continued to murmur and stare at Frances all the while he wiped the windshield. Something about him frightened Frances, and she drew her sweater closer about her shoulders.

After filling the tank, Dollie Faye came around and said, “I’ll put it on Sister’s bill.”

“Thank you, Miz Crawford,” said Miriam politely. “I’ll drop the coupons by tomorrow.”

“Well,” said Dollie Faye, with some significance, “don’t worry about it. You two girls save your brains for school. I know how hard you’re working down there, and it makes your family so happy. Listen, you need any gas, you stop by here on your way down in the morning. Just knock on my window there”—she pointed behind her—“and I’ll get up and give it to you.” She looked up and down the road. It was dark, and no car had passed since Miriam had pulled up. “There’s never anybody out this early...”

Miriam said, “Miz Crawford, you just got yourself a pair of wings in heaven.”

With a full tank of gas, Miriam and Frances drove off through the darkness toward Mobile.

. . .

With Dollie Faye’s undercover assistance, Miriam and Frances finished their year at Sacred Heart. Miriam graduated second in her class, and the Caskeys were all there to see her accept her diploma. Miriam did not hesitate to declare herself relieved that it was all over and done with now. Back in Perdido, no one dared ask her the question, What will you do now? And characteristically, Miriam did not immediately reveal her intentions. Instead, the day after graduation she appeared at breakfast at her parents’

house and said to her father, “Well, Oscar, since I’m not going to Mobile today, I might as well go over to the mill and help you out.”

“Lord, Miriam, I wish you would. I sure could use some help. Every day it seems like I’m getting further and further behind in everything.”

Father and daughter drove off together, came home at noon together, went back to the mill together right after second glasses of iced tea, and collapsed on the front porch together at five-thirty. “Miriam,” her father said with a shaking of his head, “you went through that work like nobody’s business. I never saw anything like it. You’ve set me up for a week.”

“I’ll go again tomorrow if you want me,” said Miriam offhandedly. “I don’t have anything else to do yet.”

“I wish you would,” returned Oscar quickly. He had not dared ask her directly.

After that, Miriam went to the mill every day. She kept the same hours as her father. Oscar had a hole knocked in one wall of his office in order to double the space. Miriam got her own desk and filing cabinets, and found a high school girl to do her typing. A month later, Oscar came to her office, and handed her a paycheck.

“Oscar,” she said, looking at the draft, “why are you wanting to pay me for this work? I’m doing it for fun.”

“I cain’t help it, Miriam. I was feeling so guilty about you working your head off like you’re doing, I have to do it to ease my conscience.”

She looked at the check. “Then I guess I really am working for you.”

“That’s right. I don’t think I could do without you now.”

“I don’t think you could either,” she confirmed. She handed her father the check across the desk. “So this isn’t enough money. Raise my salary.”

He shook his head, sighed, and wandered off to the accounting office. Miriam got her raise.

“What are you gone do with all that money, darling?” Sister asked her one evening at Elinor’s.

“None of your business,” returned Miriam. Only Miriam could have said that without true insolence.

“Are you gone give me some to help run the house?”

Miriam laughed. “Sister, you are rich as Croesus right now. Are you gone give me some rent for living over there in the house that belongs to me?”

“No,” returned Sister, “I am not. You don’t have any idea how much time and energy I put in to keeping that house going.”

“Then we’re even,” retorted Miriam. She looked around the porch at her family, the members of which were reading, playing checkers, or rocking in swings and gliders in the warm evening breezes. “I’m investing my money,” Miriam said.

“In what?” asked Frances, looking up.

“Diamonds,” returned Miriam. “I got me another safety-deposit box, and I’m gone fill it up...”

The family concluded that Miriam would always be Mary-Love’s little girl, no matter *how* long the old woman had been dead.

Chapter 50

Billy Bronze

Every Saturday and Sunday throughout the duration of the war, Perdido was flooded with soldiers on leave from Eglin Air Base. Some of these men wanted to attend church and others wanted to find a local girl to take to the dance hall built on stilts out over Lake Pinchona. These soldiers were eagerly taken in by Perdido families, given massive plates of fish on Saturday night, hams and racks of ribs on Sunday after church, and entertained on the front porch afterward. The servicemen were admitted free to the Ritz Theater and lent automobiles for drives to the lake. In return, the people of Perdido got extra ration coupons, smuggled tires, and food no longer available in the stores. Perdido remembered how the town had been changed by the influx of levee workers back in ’22, and this wasn’t all that different, except that the men were in uniform, came from all parts of the country, and were—thank God!—much more polite.

At the end of every Sunday church service, the congregation sang all four verses of “God Bless America” from an insert glued in the front of their hymnals. During this patriotic song, Elinor always looked about at the congregation, and would pick out the three or four or five soldiers she would ask home that day. During the postlude she would point out her choices to Queenie and Sister, and all three would hurry off to capture the men before anyone else got to them. For soldiers, Zaddie, Ivey, and Roxie fixed dinner and supper. Alone, the Caskeys had always got by with just dinner. Every Sunday, Elinor’s dining room was crowded with family and the visitors in uniform. Some of the men from Eglin came only once, but most returned two or three times. Those particularly favored by the family visited the Caskeys at every conceivable opportunity. The family had never been so social or garrulous. There was always an Air Corps man worrying the cooks in the kitchen, sitting with Elinor on the porch upstairs, or waiting on the front steps for Frances and Miriam to return from Mobile late in the afternoon.

Occasionally colored servicemen came and lounged on the lattice or in the back yard, much to the delight of Zaddie and Luvadia.

Sometimes, at meals, their numbers were so large that the dining room would not hold them, and the food was served on a buffet set out on the upstairs porch. They flirted with Sister, who was older than the mothers of most of them; they treated James and Oscar with deference. They were in awe of Elinor, and studiously polite around Frances and Miriam and Lucille as if to show the complete innocence of their intentions. They tried to take Danjo hunting, and they challenged Grace to increasingly more strenuous bouts of athletic prowess.

Most of these uniformed visitors were never around long enough to form really intimate ties with the family. After a certain amount of training they were shipped out to Europe or the South Pacific. The Caskeys received a postcard or two, sometimes censored, but soon communication usually ceased.

The single exception to this transience on the part of Elinor's multitude of guests was a corporal from the North Carolina mountains. His name was Billy Bronze. He was an instructor in radio mechanics and permanently stationed at Eglin for the training of recent enlistees. He was strikingly handsome, with dark-blond hair, gray eyes, and a jaw blue-shadowed with beard. His manner was reserved but self-assured. He was twenty-seven, and since most of Elinor's guests were no more than nineteen or twenty, he seemed mature in comparison. He once put a stop to some rowdiness in the back yard between white and colored soldiers and for his welcome intervention he was remembered and particularly asked back again. He came the next day, and the day after that. One weekend, he was asked to stay in one of the guest rooms if his leave and commanding officer permitted. He did so the following Saturday night. Elinor came to rely on Corporal Bronze to keep all the boys in order, to weed out troublemakers, and to recommend those lonely men at Eglin who were most likely to benefit from the Caskeys' hospitality.

Billy, in most circumstances, was straightforward and friendly; with Frances, however, he seemed shy. Despite this shyness, and Frances's natural diffidence, they sought each other's company. And there were many opportunities for them to be together. Billy came to Perdido at least two evenings a week and sometimes more often. He spent every other weekend there, sleeping in the front room. In a house bustling with family, servants, and guests, however, the two young people rarely found themselves alone.

Oscar said to his wife one Saturday night as they lay in bed after the house was quiet at last, “Corporal Bronze is paying a lot of attention to our little girl.”

“Yes, I believe he is,” replied Elinor.

“What do you think of that?”

“I think Billy’s a fine young man.”

“Is he good enough for Frances?”

“Nobody is good enough for our Frances, but she’s bound to get married sometime, and Billy wouldn’t be nearly as bad as some of the boys who have come through here. But it’s one thing to feed them at the dinner table, and it’s another to have them marry our daughter.”

“Do you think we should say anything to Frances?” Oscar asked.

Elinor shook her head. “Frances will have decisions to make sometime or other. She’s only twenty. Maybe she can put them off.”

“Elinor, what sort of decisions are you talking about? You mean getting married?”

“No...not that,” murmured Elinor vaguely. “Oscar, let’s go to sleep. With these boys around, my days are always long...”

. . .

The Caskeys saw the incipient romance between Frances and Billy Bronze, but they were more curious to see how Elinor would react to it than they were to watch the actual progress of this tentative courtship. They all still remembered how Mary-Love, dead for five years now, had discouraged all relationships outside the family; she would have had everyone remain unmarried and dependent upon her if she had had her way. Elinor had taken Mary-Love’s place in the family, and it seemed to them that in that role she would react just as her mother-in-law had. But Elinor did not. She made no objection. In fact, she encouraged Billy’s visits warmly, saying, “Frances enjoys having you around so much. The rest of us do, too.” Late on Saturday nights, after all the other boys had returned to Eglin and only Billy remained, Elinor took her husband off to bed and left Frances and Billy alone on the screened porch.

On one such night, after they had been thus thoughtfully abandoned, Billy and Frances sat next to each other in the swing, rocking slowly and fanning themselves with paper fans. The hot night wind blew through the high branches of the water oaks, and the kudzu rustled on the bank of the levee. By the hundreds, moths anchored themselves to the screens, attracted

to the low lights on the porch. Frances talked about Sacred Heart, and Billy spoke of Eglin. That night he kissed her.

The following night he kissed her twice.

"Who's your family?" Frances asked.

"I just have my father," he said. "And he's old and mean. Got money, though," laughed Billy.

"Your mama's dead?"

"He killed her."

"Killed her!"

"Talked mean to her for twenty-five years, until it just wore her out. He started talking mean to me at the funeral—because she wasn't around—so I joined the Air Corps. He said, 'Don't do it, Billy, I need me somebody to talk to.' I said, 'You talk to the walls and your empty bed. Goodbye.'"

"You shouldn't have spoken to your daddy like that," said Frances reprovingly.

"He killed my mother," returned Billy simply. "It was either join the Air Corps or end up beating him over the head with a two-by-four. I would have done it, too, if he had been talking mean to me for another two minutes."

"I'm sorry you don't get along."

"I am too. That's why I like coming around here."

"Why?" asked Frances.

"Because you're such a happy family."

Frances gave a little laugh.

. . .

Danjo was seventeen and in his junior year in high school when war was declared. James Caskey prayed God every night that Danjo might not be influenced by Elinor's visiting servicemen to enlist on the day that he turned eighteen. James would have been as forlorn without Danjo as Queenie was without Malcolm—who didn't even bother to write to his mother.

"You don't want to leave me, do you, darling?" said James. They were having breakfast one morning before Danjo went to school. Grace had left an hour earlier for an early morning swim at Lake Pinchona.

"'Course not," replied Danjo. "But probably I got to, James, unless they call off the war."

"They're not gone do that, I'm afraid. No, sir."

“I’ve been talking to Billy—”

“Don’t you talk to those boys, Danjo, not even Billy Bronze!” cried James. “They’re gone want you to join up. Bad enough they’re always wanting to put a gun in your hands. Haven’t Queenie and I taught you better than that? You remember what happened to your daddy and how he died. You remember what your brother did to poor old Dollie Faye Crawford. You think about that next time somebody puts a gun in your hands.”

“I hate guns!” cried Danjo vehemently.

“You’re my precious boy!” said James, and squeezed Danjo’s hand across the table.

“Still, I was talking to Billy...” Danjo resumed tentatively.

“And?”

“James, you know I *got* to sign up next year sometime, I just *got* to.”

“It’s gone kill me if you do! I suppose you have to do it. This country has been good to us, and now I guess it’s time for us to be good to it. But I don’t want you picking up a gun unless you are planning to shoot Adolf Hitler himself.”

“I won’t,” promised Danjo. “Let me finish, will you? Billy said if I signed up now—”

“No!”

“—if I signed up now,” repeated Danjo deliberately, “I could sort of have my choice. And what he said was I could join the Air Corps and he’d talk to people and try to get me stationed over at Eglin. I could get in the Radio Corps, and Billy would take care of me for as long as he could. See, that’s all I was trying to say, James, and you wouldn’t let me finish!”

“Does Billy really think he could get you stationed over at Eglin?”

“He says he could try.”

James nodded slowly. “Then the next time I see him I’ll speak to him about it. Maybe if you were over at Eglin, Danjo, it wouldn’t kill me to have you gone.”

“You’ll have Grace here,” Danjo pointed out.

“Grace will not make up for the loss of my little boy. Danjo, I just don’t know what I’m gone do without you! I’m such an old man—I’m an old gray mare—and there’s no more children around for me to steal and bring up like they were my own.”

“Maybe Grace’ll get married and have children, and you can take one of hers,” suggested Danjo brightly.

“Grace is already an old bachelor,” sighed James. “She’s not gone get married. That’s fine, ’cause she’s pretty happy staying here with me, but I’m not gone get any grandchildren out of her.”

“You want me to get married then?”

“I most certainly do not! You are too young to even think about that! I haven’t even told you yet...”

“Told me what?”

James shrugged, embarrassed. “How babies get born.”

“I know that!” laughed Danjo. “James, I’m seventeen, ’course I know that!”

“Who told you?”

“Grace.”

James shook his head slowly. “She would have.”

“Grace tells all the girls, and one day she told me, too. She’s got these pictures, James, you ought to see them—”

“Don’t talk about this to me at the breakfast table, Danjo. I don’t want to hear it! If you know all about it already, then we don’t ever have to mention it again.”

“No, sir!” laughed Danjo.

. . .

Following Billy’s suggestion, and with James’s reluctant assent, Danjo joined the Air Corps in September of 1942, though he would not be formally inducted until the following June, when he had turned eighteen and graduated from high school. Nothing could be certain in this war, but Billy provided tentative assurances that Danjo, after three months of basic training, would find his way back to Eglin. James could not be happy, however, and thought only of the scant nine months that remained for Danjo to be at home with him.

He sighed to Grace one afternoon, “Every morning I get up and I say to myself, ‘There’s one less day Danjo’s gone be around.’”

Grace always took the forthright and practical view of any matter. “You’ve still got more than half a year of him. Enjoy that, Daddy. Don’t ruin it by always thinking of when he’s going away. And just remember, he’ll be headed back to Eglin before you know it. Two years from then he’ll be a civilian again, and he’ll come back here and things will be just like they always were.”

“He could get killed. He could get his legs shot off. I may be dead,” protested James Caskey. “Things are never ‘just like they always were’ again.”

Grace slapped a magazine against the arm of the glider with a crack. “Daddy,” she said, “you have got to be the silliest man I ever met in my life. I don’t *know* what I’m going to do with you for the rest of this war.”

. . .

The efforts of Billy Bronze in the cause of keeping Danjo Strickland and James Caskey together were fully appreciated by the Caskeys. They not only liked Billy, they were now indebted to him. Elinor no longer extended invitations to him, because he only had to appear to be welcomed. He was regarded as one of the family to such an extent that his presence never restrained them from talking about private family matters. He heard details of old family enmities, and new family finances that no one in Perdido knew about. Short, testy arguments exploded in his presence, and little moments of affection were exhibited before him. He became another Caskey son, brother, uncle, and cousin.

The corporal was a favorite also of his commanding officer. He was allowed, so long as he did not abuse the privilege, of sleeping over at the Caskeys on some week nights as well as every other weekend. Oscar lent him one of their automobiles, saying that with gas rationing they had no use for it anyway. Billy Bronze came and went with ever-increasing frequency; the front room was always ready for him. Elinor, trusting both Billy and Frances implicitly, did not even bother locking the linen corridor that connected the two rooms.

One evening in the autumn of 1942—a few hours after Billy Bronze had returned to Eglin—Frances begged a private conference with her mother. *“Very* private, Mama,” she said. Elinor took her daughter down the long second-floor hallway, through the door with the stained glass at the end, and out onto the narrow front porch where no one ever sat. Mother and daughter took adjoining rockers. The evening was dark. Crickets chorused in the orchard across the road. Elinor rocked steadily in her chair.

“I bet I know what you want to ask me about,” she said.

“You do?”

“You want me to tell you about husbands and wives.”

Frances blushed in the darkness.

“No, ma’am, not that.”

Elinor paused in her rocking. “What then?”

“Dial Crawford.”

Elinor laughed. “Dial Crawford? What on earth have you got to do with that old man? Poor old Dollie Faye. She told me Dial hasn’t been right in his head for twenty years, and he’s no more help to her than a three-year-old.”

“He washes windshields.”

“And not much else,” confirmed Elinor. “What about Dial, darling? What on earth do you want to know about *him?”*

Frances began hesitantly: “I...stop out at Miss Dollie Faye’s for gas about twice a week, on my way to school, and Mr. Crawford always washes the windshield. He always speaks, but he has such a funny voice that it was always hard for me to understand what he was saying. For a long time, I had no idea what he was talking about, but in the past month or two, it seems like I got used to the way he sounds, and I can understand him. So we always speak. Some days, even when I’m not stopping, I see him sitting out in front of the store and he stands up and waves. So I wave back. I guess he knows the car, and knows what time I’m gone be coming past.”

“Well? He probably doesn’t have much to occupy him.”

“Mama, that’s five o’clock in the morning!”

“Country people get up early. Anyway, go on, Frances.”

“Yesterday morning, I had plenty of gas so I wasn’t gone stop. But there was Mr. Crawford, standing on the side of the road, waving me down. So I stopped the car, and I said, ‘Is there something wrong, Mr. Crawford?’ So, Mama, he looks at me, and he says, *‘Black water.’”*

“Black water?” echoed Elinor, with the same inflection.

“He said, *‘Black water,* that’s where you came from. *Black water,* that’s where you’re going back to.’” Frances glanced at her mother in the darkness, but could not determine her expression. Elinor had stopped her rocking.

“What else did Dial say, darling?”

“He said something else...”

“What?” prompted Elinor with some impatience.

“He said, ‘Your mama crawled out of the river.’ He said, ‘Tell your mama to crawl back in and leave me alone.’”

Elinor laughed. “I didn’t know I had been upsetting Dial Crawford. Maybe I ought to stay away from there from now on, and let Queenie do all

my shopping for me."

"Mama, what did he mean, that you crawled out of the river?"

"Frances, Dial is a crazy old man. He doesn't know what he's saying, and Dollie Faye ought to teach him to keep his mouth shut." Frances didn't reply. "Darling, do *you* think I crawled out of the river?"

"No, no," returned Frances hastily. "Of course not. It's just that sometimes..."

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I think you and I are different—different from everybody else."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know how I mean, Mama. It's just that sometimes I feel like I'm not all here, not the way Miriam is, not the way Daddy and Sister and Queenie and everybody else is. I feel like part of me is somewhere else."

"Where is that somewhere else?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure." Frances paused. "I *do* know where else. The river, the Perdido. Just like Mr. Crawford said, *black water*, flowing out there behind the levee. And, Mama," Frances said very softly, "when I'm there, you're there too."

For a few minutes, Elinor said nothing. Then she asked, "And does this bother you?"

"No, not until yesterday, when Mr. Crawford sort of put his finger on it. When he said what he said, I realized what I had been feeling all these years."

"If you've been feeling it all these years, what difference does it make now?"

Frances didn't answer.

Elinor took her daughter's hand and squeezed it. "I know why," she whispered. She raised Frances's hand to her lips and kissed it. "It's because of Billy, isn't it, darling?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Frances in a timid voice. "I just wanted to know if it would make a difference. If I ever wanted to get married, or anything. And the problem is, I don't even know what 'it' is."

Elinor did not reply immediately. After a few moments' silence, she said to her daughter, "Frances, I'm going to answer your question and I'm going to tell you the truth. But when I do that, I don't want any more questions, you understand?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then the truth is that someday, in your lifetime, it *will* make a difference. It won’t make a difference now. You go ahead and do whatever you want to. Someday, Frances, I’m going to be the proudest woman in town, ’cause I’m going to watch my little girl get married to a man who will make her happy. And someday my little girl is going to give me some grandchildren.”

“Mama, you think so?”

“I don’t think so, I *know* it.” Elinor laughed then. She still had hold of Frances’s hand, and she squeezed it again. “And you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to steal one of those children, just like Mary-Love stole Miriam from me. Then everybody in this family can rant and rave and say that I’m just as bad as Mary-Love ever was. But I’ll have me a little girl...”

“How do you know it’ll be a girl?”

Elinor didn’t answer. She seemed only happy in anticipating the stealing of a grandchild. She reassured Frances: “I don’t want you to be thinking about what Dial Crawford said to you, you hear? It’s not going to make any difference for a long, long time.”

“But someday it will?”

“No questions, I told you! But someday...yes, it will. Darling, I promise you I’ll be there when that time comes. And when the time comes, I’ll tell you what you need to know. You believe that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You trust me, Frances?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are my little girl. Miriam isn’t. Even if I hadn’t given Miriam away to Mary-Love, and had kept both of you, you’d still be my daughter in a way that Miriam is not.”

Frances was obediently silent, and asked no further questions.

Elinor’s voice grew faraway. “I had a sister. Bet you didn’t know that...”

“No, ma’am. You’ve never mentioned her,” said Frances cautiously. Hoping that they did not constitute forbidden questions, she asked: “Is she still alive? What was her name?”

“My mama had two daughters. My sister was just like my mama, but I wasn’t anything like my mama. My mama said to me, ‘Elinor, you’re so different, you go off and do whatever you want. I have’”—Elinor paused as

if her sister's name had escaped her memory. In a moment she resumed —"'I have Nerita, and Nerita is just like me in every way.' So Mama got rid of me, the way I got rid of Miriam. And Mama and Nerita were alike the way you and I are alike, do you understand that?"

"I think so."

"You see," Elinor went on, "as soon as Miriam was born, I saw that she wasn't anything like me. She was a Caskey baby, and that's why I gave her up to Mary-Love and Sister—because she belonged to them anyway. But when you were born, I saw right away that you were *my* baby, and that's why I will never give you up. I will always be here for you."

"Mama," cried Frances, "I love you so much!"

"You are my precious girl!"

Frances stumbled out of her rocker and fell at her mother's feet. She grasped her legs and squeezed them tight. Elinor leaned over and kissed her daughter's head. "Darling," she whispered in Frances's ear, "crazy old men like Dial, sometimes they know more than everybody else put together. Sometimes they speak the truth."

Chapter 51

The Proposal

As Danjo prepared to go away for basic training at Camp Blanding on the Atlantic coast of Florida, James fussed about the boy relentlessly, wanting him in sight every minute. Most boys Danjo's age would have quickly resented an old man's worrisome solicitude, but Danjo bore with it. The last few days when he ought to have been going around town paying farewell calls, Danjo was allowed only to sit on the front porch with James and listen to the old man sigh and say things like: "I sure hope I'm alive when you get back, Danjo. I sure hope there's somebody here to open your letters when you write home."

The unhappy day of departure came at last. James had wanted Bray to drive him and Danjo the four hundred miles to Camp Blanding so that he could hug his boy at the front gate, but Danjo drew the line at this. "I'm taking the bus, James, just like everybody else does. You want to do something for me, you get Elinor to make me some candy to take along and remind me of Perdido."

The box of candy, cookies, and cakes Elinor prepared for Danjo under James's supervision weighed nearly as much as all the boy's luggage.

On the afternoon of the day before Danjo was to leave, James and his daughter sat on the front porch of their house. "Daddy," said Grace, "why are we just sitting here moping? Why don't we at least go on over to Elinor's where there's some people?"

"Grace, you go on. This afternoon, I want you to let me mope in peace."

"I don't know if I ought to point this out, Daddy, but you are making me feel real bad, going on about Danjo like this."

"Why, darling?"

"Because you act like you're left all alone. But you're not. I'm here, and haven't I sworn up and down the churchyard steeple that I'm never gone get married or leave you?"

"You have."

"Then why do you act like you are all alone in the world?"

The afternoon was hot, and James sat in his shirtsleeves. His chair was placed in the shadows of the porch so that no one passing by chance in front of the house should see him in such dishabille. He fanned himself with a paper fan. Grace sat beside him, full in the sunlight, with her arms turned outward for an even tan. Across the road, the cows in the orchard lay in the shade of the pecan trees, swishing their tails against flies.

"Let me ask you, darling," said James. "You remember how you loved all those girls who used to come and visit you here in the summers?"

"'Course I do."

"You remember, though, when you went off to Spartanburg, you sort of got to love one girl special?"

"I do, and then she up and married and I never want to hear her name spoken aloud by you or anybody else in this town!"

"I'd never do that," returned James calmly. "Well, that's how I feel about Danjo, darling, that's how much I love that boy. I love you too, of course, I always have loved you, but Danjo's been something special to me, 'cause he was the only thing I ever had that was all my very own."

"What about me?"

"You belonged to Genevieve some. Genevieve could have taken you away from me if she had wanted to. Nobody was gone take Danjo away, not after Carl died, anyway. Are you mad at me for feeling like this?"

Grace laughed. Her eyes were closed against the sun. "Of course not, Daddy! I was just trying to get you upset, that's all. I know how you care about Danjo, and I'm not jealous. Danjo's the sweetest boy in the world, and there's nothing more to be said about *him!* I just hope you're not gone try to send me away."

"I wouldn't send my little girl away, not for the world!"

. . .

Contrary to James Caskey's doubts, Danjo Strickland was assigned to Eglin Air Base at the end of his basic training. James knew of many families who had sent their sons off with every expectation of Private X seeing two years of duty behind the information desk at the Arlington National Cemetery, only to discover that the War Department conceived that the only place for Private X was stoking the boiler of a destroyer in the western Pacific. But in Danjo's case, things worked out as planned, and after basic training, Danjo Strickland was sent to Eglin. He was able to visit his uncle two or three times a week.

Billy Bronze got all the credit for Danjo's assignment so close to home. It was true that Billy had asked his commanding officer if anything might be done, but he had no way of knowing whether his request had had anything to do with the matter. Danjo trained as a radio engineer and, as such, was under Billy's supervision. When Billy drove from Eglin over to Perdido, he often managed to bring Danjo with him, and thus his arrival in Perdido was now doubly welcome. Billy wasn't loathe to accept the thanks of the Caskeys. He intended to ask Frances to marry him, and he didn't think it would hurt his cause to have the family think he had done them all a great favor.

Billy Bronze was a handsome, intelligent man, whose one desire in life was to be comfortable and to be taken care of. His father was rich, but the old man had anything but a loving disposition, and Billy had never had much comfort or care as a child. He had been packed off to military school at the age of eight. Unlike most of his young classmates, he had never allowed himself to suffer a moment of homesickness, and had never once looked forward to a holiday.

Now, years later, he was grateful for having fallen in with the Caskeys. Men at Eglin occasionally chided him for courting an heiress, and Billy, because he himself was heir to a substantial fortune, did not bridle at the accusation. He was fascinated by the Caskeys, and by the women particularly. Billy had been around few women. His mother had been a browbeaten invalid. Billy had seen her leave her shuttered room only once, and that was when she was taken from it in her coffin. His father's servants had all been men except for the cook in the kitchen, where he was never allowed. At military school he had met one woman, the wife of the commander, and one girl, the commander's daughter. Billy was one of three hundred boys, and that didn't lend itself to intimacy with those two females.

But not only were there a great many Caskey women, the women were in control of the family. Billy had never seen anything like it, and the whole notion fascinated him. He loved being around the Caskeys, and had grown very quickly to love them all. With equal delight he attended to Queenie's detailed gossip, Miriam's snide remarks, Frances's shy speech, Grace's masculine banter, Lucille's flirtatious coyness, and Elinor's commanding pronouncements. Even the servants seemed to have been affected by the Caskey women's assumption of power. Zaddie, Ivey, Roxie, and Luvadia did and said what they saw fit to do and say. In contrast, Oscar seemed

rather put upon, and might have been utterly powerless if he had not enjoyed at least superficial control of the mill. James Caskey had abdicated his rights entirely, and had become a kind of woman himself. Danjo was a strong, masculine boy, but one trained nevertheless to believe that real power and real prestige lay with women and not with men. Billy, a year before he had come to Eglin, would never have believed that such a family existed. Now, he wanted never to leave them.

He wondered what he would have done if there had been no marriageable daughter in the family; by what subterfuge he would have remained in Perdido and in the Caskey circle. As it was, there were—in theory, at any rate—three such prospects in the household: Frances, Miriam, and Lucille. Lucille was out; even his limited exposure to women had taught Billy enough to know to stay away from *that* type. When it came to Miriam and Frances, so unlike each other considering that they were sisters, Billy had chosen Frances. He had made this choice not because he believed that Frances would make the better wife, but because he had thought her more likely to accept an offer of marriage. His principal aim had been to join the Caskey clan; the means by which he accomplished this was a matter of secondary importance.

So Billy wooed Frances as best he knew how—in a simple, straightforward manner. He had made it clear from the beginning that he intended sooner or later to ask her to marry him; no other method ever occurred to him. And despite his less than romantic intentions, he discovered in the course of this courtship that he actually did love Frances. He couldn't point to any particular physical, emotional, or mental attributes that made him fall in love with her; it had simply happened. And he could pinpoint the very moment. It was late one afternoon in the spring of 1943. He and Frances were walking around the house looking at the buds on the azaleas, and she was talking about the three years she had spent in bed with crippling arthritis. Suddenly he saw Frances with different eyes, as if a changed sun poured down a new quality of light upon her face and form. Interrupting her casual tale, he said, "Frances, you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm in love with you, that's what."

"You are?" she laughed, blushing. "Well, you know what? I'm in love with you, and now you and me and the whole town know it."

"The whole town?"

Frances nodded. “Every morning Queenie comes over here and she says, ‘Frances, when is that boy going to ask you to marry him?’” She stopped, and laughed again. “Oh, Lord! I guess I shouldn’t say that, should I? ’Cause it sounds like I’m sort of asking you to ask me.”

They were in back of the house now, strolling among the slender trunks of the water oaks. They sat down on the plank seat between two of the trees.

“You want me to ask you?” Billy said.

“Well, of course I do,” said Frances. “But not if you don’t want to. I mean”—she stopped, and tried to look serious and upset—“I really *shouldn’t* say this. Sister would kill me. Mama would probably kill me, too. I mean, if you don’t want to marry me, then I’m embarrassing you, right? You’ll feel sort of obligated to ask, and there won’t be any way for you to get out of it. And anyway, the girl’s never supposed to mention it before the boy does. But the trouble is, I’m always thinking about it, and I’m always sort of assuming it’s going to happen, but I guess I shouldn’t, should I? I mean, if you want to turn around and drive right back to Eglin and pretend I never said—”

“Frances, are you gone marry me or not?”

“Of course I am!” she giggled. She looked around the yard and was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “Is that it? Does that take care of everything?” Coyness, it was evident, was not to be found in Frances’s repertoire of behavior.

“For the time being.”

“What else is there?” asked Frances.

“Well, for one thing, we have to decide when we’re going to tell your family.”

“My family already knows. I told you, they keep wanting to know if you’ve asked me yet.”

“Then we have to decide when.”

“When what?”

“When we get married. I imagine your mama will want to do a little something in the way of a wedding. You’re graduating from Sacred Heart in May, and we ought to wait for that. It might even be best to wait till after the war. I could be transferred out of Eglin any day.”

“I don’t care,” said Frances. “One way or the other, I’m just glad it’s all settled so I don’t have to think about it anymore, and everybody will

shut up about it."

"And the most important thing..."

"What?"

"What we're going to do after we *are* married."

Frances looked at him blankly.

"I mean," said Billy, "where we're going to live and all that."

"Oh," said Frances, as if she had not considered this before. "I don't think Mama's gone want me to move out. I think she's just gone want you to move in. Mama and Daddy would want everything to be the same except that you and I would be sleeping in the same room." A thought suddenly occurred to her. She looked at Billy earnestly, and spoke with a tremor in her voice, "Billy, promise me one thing."

"What?"

"After we're married, you sleep in my room. Promise me you won't make me sleep in the front room."

He smiled. "Do you have nightmares in that room, too?"

She nodded. Then her expression changed and she said, "But wait, where do *you* want to live after we're married? I guess, if you made me, I'd go away with you."

"No, I'm not gone make you do anything you don't want to do. Besides, I want to live here. I want to move in with your mama and daddy. You know," he said, leaning over and kissing her, "that the only reason I'm marrying you is so that I can become a Caskey, too."

"I know that. I'm just lucky you didn't choose Miriam..."

They sat on the bench and stared at the levee. Suddenly, after so many weeks together in which neither had had the least difficulty with speech, both were tongue-tied.

"Let's go up there," said Frances suddenly, pointing.

"Up on the levee?"

"Yes. Haven't you ever been up at the top?"

Billy shook his head. "I didn't know you could get up there."

"Over behind James's house there are steps. The kudzu's pretty much covered them, but they're still there." She took his hand and led him across the yards to the base of the steps. They were hidden, but she had no difficulty in finding them. "Be careful," she said, "Daddy always said there're snakes living in this kudzu, even though I've never seen any."

Wading up through the kudzu as they might have maneuvered an unfamiliar staircase in the dark, they climbed to the top of the levee. In the twenty years since these clay banks had been built, the sides had been completely grown over with the rampaging vine; it had choked out everything else. But at the level top of the levee were oak and pine saplings that had taken root. Wild verbena also grew here, as well as Indian paintbrush, pale petunias, and degenerate phlox, all wind-seeded from some Perdido garden. In two decades the levee had grown almost invisible to the inhabitants of the town, even to those who lived within its very shadow. Children, to whom it was no novelty, felt no desire to play on it, and were no longer warned against its dangers. The rivers that flowed behind the levees had become even less familiar to those who lived in the town. Who ever thought of the Perdido and the Blackwater? One saw them only when crossing the bridge below the Osceola Hotel, and the new concrete sides to that bridge cut off most of that view.

At the top, Billy Bronze was surprised by the aspect of the river on the other side. “It looks so wild!” he exclaimed. The Perdido was swift, the water swirling, muddy, red. Its movement was urgent, insistent, inexorable. “It looks dangerous. No wonder they put these levees up.”

Frances chuckled. “I love this river! Let’s walk down toward the junction.” She took his hand and led him on. To their right were the houses that had once belonged to the DeBordenaves and the Turks. One was shut up with the windows boarded over, and the other had been taken over by the undertaker. “You know,” said Frances, “Mama loves the river even more than I do. From about March till November, she swims in it every day.”

“In that!?”

Frances nodded. “She’s done it for as long as I can remember. Mama’s about the best swimmer I ever met. I’m pretty good myself. Sometimes,” Frances added with pride, “I go swimming with her.”

“But it’s so swift! How can you swim in it?”

Frances shrugged. “I don’t know, I just do. When I was so sick,” she said, with an effort to remember, “Mama bathed me every day in Perdido water and that’s what finally made me well.”

“How could that cure you?”

“I don’t know. Mama says I was baptized in Perdido water and that’s why it cured me. Maybe that was it.”

They had reached the junction. Behind them was the town hall. The bus from the Pensacola shipyards was just then letting out the women workers in the parking lot; some of their husbands waited in automobiles. In front of the newly affianced couple the swift red water of the Perdido and the black water of the smaller Blackwater spiraled together and sank in a swirling vortex down toward the muddy bottom.

"When you go swimming, aren't you afraid of that?" Billy asked, pointing down.

Frances didn't answer. She stared at the whirlpool, again as if trying to remember something.

"What if you got sucked down in it? You'd be drowned for sure."

"No..." said Frances absently. "Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm trying to remember..."

"Remember what?"

"I *have* been down there," she said at last, and looked at her fiancé with a puzzled expression. "I think I remember going down in it."

Billy looked at it again. "You'd remember that," he said.

Frances shook her head. "No...it's just vague."

"Then tell me what's down there?" Billy asked, as if it were all a tease.

"Mama..."

"What?"

"Mama's down there."

"Frances, are you all right, you look so..."

Frances shook herself, and closed her eyes tightly. She opened them and said, "Billy, I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"Nothing. Let's go back, all right?"

They retraced their steps along the levee, and spoke no more of Frances's memory of the vortex at the junction of the rivers. They walked carefully down the steps through the kudzu. At the bottom, Billy said, "Oh, Frances, you never *really* went down that whirlpool. You couldn't have, you'd have been drowned for sure."

. . .

Frances wasted no time in telling her family of her engagement. Elinor kissed her daughter and then kissed Billy Bronze, and said, "Billy, I hope there's not going to be any nonsense about the two of you going away anywhere once you're married. I hope that you and Frances are going to

want to stay on here just like you always have. What would Oscar and I do without our little girl? What would we do without *you* for that matter?"

"Elinor," said her husband, "you know who you sound like? You sound just like Mama when you and I wanted to get married. She didn't want us to go off—and you know what kind of trouble that caused."

"Oscar, I am nothing in the world like Mary-Love, and I don't appreciate your saying I am."

"Miz Caskey," said Billy, "Frances and I aren't going anywhere. One big reason I'm marrying her in the first place is so that I can stay on here with you and Oscar."

Elinor nodded her approval of this sentiment, and Oscar looked pleased.

They sat on the upstairs porch until suppertime, talking over plans for the couple's future. One by one the other Caskeys wandered over and received the news with only slightly varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Sister's congratulations were effusive for her niece, though strangely commingled with some dismal predictions for the marriage itself. "Are you sure you know what you're getting into? I'll bet you don't. I'll bet you discover on the inside of six months that it was all a big mistake." Everyone —including Frances and Billy—understood that Sister was talking about her own marriage more than anything else, and so accepted the comments in good part.

"What about your daddy?" asked Queenie Strickland, who always found the one question no one else had thought of.

"Why, yes," said Elinor, "you think he'll come down for the wedding?"

Billy shook his head doubtfully. "No, ma'am, I don't believe he will."

"You don't think he'd approve of your marrying our little gitchee-gumee?" asked Oscar gleefully.

"Daddy, I wish you wouldn't call me that. I'm twenty-one years old. I'm not a baby, and you don't read me poems out of books anymore."

"My father," said Billy, "is pretty much bound to object to anything I do."

"That's too bad," said Sister sympathetically, recalling the similar aspects of her childhood.

"Is that going to stop you?" asked Elinor. "He could disinherit you."

“He could, but I don’t think he’d do that. Even if he did, it wouldn’t stop me.”

Frances looked around the porch with pride, as if to say, *Look what this man would do for me...*

“You want me to call him up and speak to him?” asked Elinor. “I don’t mind explaining things to him.”

Billy shook his head. “Better let me do that. He’s not going to like it—and there’s no reason for you to have to listen to what he’s going to say.”

“I don’t know why *some* people don’t just up and die,” said Queenie pointedly. “It would sure make some *other* people real happy.”

“Queenie,” said James, “you are talking about Billy’s *daddy!”*

“That’s all right, Mr. James,” said Billy. “Mrs. Strickland’s not saying any worse than I’ve said once or twice in my life.”

“How children survive their parents,” sighed Sister, “is a thing I will *never* understand.”

Miriam, who through all this had sat on the glider reading the afternoon Mobile paper in the fading sunlight, folded the paper, dropped it on the floor, and said, “When is the wedding? If I’m supposed to be in it, then somebody tell me now so that I can get Sister to start thinking about getting me a dress and shoes and whatever else it takes.”

“Miriam,” cried Sister, “you’re not supposed to ask somebody if you’re going to be in their wedding, they’re supposed to ask you!”

“Miriam, would you be my maid of honor?” asked Frances timidly, glancing at her mother for approval.

Elinor nodded.

“If you want me to,” said Miriam. “If you don’t want me to, Frances, then say so and ask somebody else. It’s not going to hurt my feelings.”

“No,” said Frances. “I want you. You’re my sister.”

“All right, then,” said Miriam. “It’s settled. Sister, are you gone see about getting me a dress or something to wear?”

“Well, of course I will, darling, but it’s not as easy as that. First we’ve got to find out what the bride is going to wear. These things take a lot of time.”

Miriam appeared to take the news of her sister’s engagement with equanimity, if not actual indifference. “When is this thing going to be?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” said Billy. “At least not until after Frances finishes Sacred Heart. We may even wait till the end of the war.”

“Who knows when that’s going to be,” snorted James. “When they’ve taken away *all* our boys, I guess.”

“I guess,” said Billy.

“You better not wait till the end of the war,” said Elinor. “James is right. Who knows how long it might go on?”

Zaddie appeared in the doorway to announce supper. There was general movement as everyone got up out of swing, chair, and glider.

“Get married in the summer,” said Queenie, walking toward the door.

“Not in August,” said Sister, following along. “Everybody in the church will melt. And do you know what happens to flowers in a church in August? Only thing worse than to get married in August is to die in August. Mama died in August, and we had to do everything but pack her in ice.”

They all headed down the stairs toward the dining room. Frances hung back, and remained behind until she and Miriam were alone on the porch.

“Are you happy for me?” she asked her sister diffidently.

“Of course,” snapped Miriam. “Though why Billy would consent to stay in this house with Elinor is a thing I will never understand.”

“Billy loves Mama!”

“Then he’s a fool,” said Miriam with a decisive nod. She peered at her sister, Frances, whose looks were suddenly downcast. “But if he loves you,” said Miriam, softening, “then it doesn’t matter one little bit whether he’s a fool or not.”

Frances looked up with a smile.

“Everything’s gone be cold if we don’t go down,” said Miriam, and marched toward the door. As the sisters were going down the stairs, Miriam turned and spoke over her shoulder. “I don’t know why you two didn’t do what everybody else in this family has always done—just run off and get married. You better tell me right away what you want for a wedding present, ’cause I tell you, I am so busy at the mill I’m not gone have *any* time to go out shopping for it.”

Chapter 52

Lake Pinchona

During the war, Queenie was taken care of by the Caskeys more than ever. She didn't have a job, and wanted no position but that of companion to James. James supplied her with money. Sister and Elinor gave her ration coupons. She never cooked because the Caskey tables were always open to her and to Lucille. Queenie was a bit of a poor relation, and she made herself useful in the ways that poor relations had always employed themselves: as fill-in companion, as runner of small errands, as listening post, and sometimes even as whipping boy. She had become, since the death of her husband Carl, a clear-sighted woman who didn't bemoan her inferior circumstances. She did not resent the kindnesses that were done her, and she ignored the unconscious slights she occasionally perceived in the behavior of the Caskeys toward her and her children.

Queenie might have demanded more, had it not been for the problem of her offspring. Danjo belonged completely to James Caskey. No one would have interfered if she had claimed her rights as the boy's mother, except for the fact that Carl had fairly traded Danjo to James in exchange for a new automobile. This had been almost fifteen years before, but Queenie still had that car, though it now sat in her driveway, empty of gas. In commerce with James's house, Queenie saw her son frequently, but there was no more real parental love between them than there was between Elinor and Miriam. Queenie was like a distant aunt to Danjo. Sometimes Queenie sighed over this, not because she missed Danjo or regretted the bargain, but only because, of the three children she had borne, Danjo had turned out best. She often wished that either Malcolm or Lucille instead of Danjo had been the object of Carl and James's transaction.

Of her eldest, she heard little. Malcolm had trained at Camp Blanding, had been stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey, and had reenlisted and been transferred to somewhere in Texas. He had been promoted twice and liked army life. Everybody who had known Malcolm said blandly to Queenie, "The discipline will probably do that boy a lot of good. It's probably just what he needed." Such criticism stung. Queenie suspected she had not been cut out for motherhood. Where her son spent his furloughs Queenie had no

idea. She wondered whether she would ever see him again. With all the fighting in Europe and the Pacific, it seemed inevitable that Malcolm would soon be sent over. He wrote infrequently, and Queenie read every brief letter carefully, always with the thought in her head that it might prove to be his last communication.

Lucille was turning out no better than Malcolm. Behind the candy counter at the Ben Franklin, Lucille flirted with every soldier who walked into the store. She had also taken an evening job, waiting on tables out at Lake Pinchona. Queenie had not been in favor of this, but she could not refuse the girl the opportunity to make some extra money.

Lucille had a stack of photographs of Air Corps men tied with a yellow string in the top drawer of her dresser. Queenie had found it one day while searching for a button. On the weekend, Lucille spent all day and all evening out at the lake, where there were at least three military men for every local girl. Only once did Queenie venture to remonstrate, saying, "Darling, these aren't Perdido boys who are coming in from Eglin."

"Mama," said Lucille in her peeved, whining voice, "is that supposed to convey some meaning to me?"

"It just means that they didn't grow up with you. They don't know how sweet and innocent most Perdido girls are, and sometime one of them might try to go too far."

Lucille eyed her mother suspiciously. "Nobody's gone go too far with me, Ma. I don't even know why you'd want to say something like that to me. I'm just embarrassed to hear it spoke!"

Queenie said no more. In her unhappy heart, she knew for a certainty that her daughter *had* gone too far with one of the men from Eglin.

. . .

Lake Pinchona was a seven-mile drive from Perdido. The fifty-acre lake was irregular in shape, with many narrow fingers of forested land jutting out into the water and many secluded tongues of water lapping into the surrounding forest of pine, cedar, and cypress. On the western side of the lake was a pasture with a herd of Holstein cows. The grass on which those cows grazed was the thickest, greenest grass anyone in Perdido had ever seen. The colors of that grass, the water of the lake, and the skies that arched over the whole scene were like the colors in a paint box, mysterious and impossibly rich. The water of the lake was bright blue, and its fringes were thick with water lilies. Brave men unafraid of the alligators in the lake

took their nervous girlfriends for rides in small boats. The alligators were so well fed by children dropping bread out of the windows of the dance hall, however, that there was little danger to those who ventured out onto the water.

Built next to a large picnic area beneath a grove of immense cedars, the dance hall was large, rectangular, and constructed entirely out over the water, with a gangway providing access from the land. A kitchen and a small screened-in dining room ran along one side, but most of the space was the dance area itself. It had a dark wooden floor, a shadowy vaulted ceiling, and a bench running around three sides beneath an uninterrupted line of windows. The place always seemed dim, not only because of the dark wood but because of the contrast of the bright light coming in through the windows and the front door. Outside, on the other side of the picnic area, were a concession stand, two small bathhouses, and a large swimming pool.

The lake was immensely popular during the war. It was close enough to Eglin to make returning to the base late at night no great difficulty. It attracted girls from Perdido, Bay Minette, Brewton, Atmore, Fairhope, Vaughn, Daphne, and even Mobile. Dancing began at five o'clock and ended at midnight. On weekends a band was hired, and a dollar admission fee charged. The place was run by a middle-aged couple, but they were so busy in the kitchen with hamburgers and hot dogs that they had little time to spend supervising those who came to the lake. Prudish folk in the surrounding towns began to whisper about what went on at Lake Pinchona, but the more sophisticated held that the dance floor of Lake Pinchona was a better place for the daughters of Baldwin and Escambia counties than the back seat of an automobile.

. . .

Lucille waited tables—often quite ineptly—in the small dining room off the dance floor from six until nine every evening. She was the only waitress, and she sometimes gathered as much as four or five dollars in tips from the servicemen. When her shift was over, she hurried out to the darkened bathhouse and changed from her white uniform into a more becoming dress. Her favorite moment of the entire day was her reentrance into the dance hall, the hairnet and the shapeless white dress and apron of her waitress's uniform cast aside; her face was scrubbed, her hair brushed, her dress freshly pressed and still smelling of the sun it had been dried in that

morning. All the Air Corps men flocked around her and said things like, “Are you sure you’re the same girl who dropped the French fries and poured that coffee in my lap?” Lucille always laughed gaily, and returned, “That sure wasn’t me, that was my twin sister!”

She danced with anyone who asked her. With the one she liked best during the course of the evening, she would sit pertly on the bench that ran around the room. She and that serviceman would turn and gaze out the windows at the moon and the stars and the shimmering water of the lake, with its ring of water lilies whitely glowing on their black pads. The dance hall was noisy and bright, but Lucille and the Air Corps man, feeling themselves more part of the dark, quiet night, would turn and look at each other and smile. At this juncture, Lucille would invariably ask in her coyest voice, “What’s your name?”

Month succeeded month at Lake Pinchona, but Lucille never grew weary of her evening ritual. Her mother didn’t see how she could keep it up: all day on her feet behind the candy counter at the Ben Franklin, waiting tables in the early evening, and then dancing until eleven or twelve. But Lucille didn’t feel fatigue. “It’s my war effort,” she said airily.

An abnormally mild winter was followed by an unusually warm spring, and the lake opened for business several weeks early. Now the crowds were even heavier than the year before, and the kitchen hours were lengthened from six until ten. Lucille was still the only girl on the floor, but there weren’t any more dropped plates of French fries or spilled cups of coffee. Her work was all done by rote. Her actions as much as her smile were distant and absent from her thoughts. Every minute she looked forward to that magic moment when she reentered the dance hall, transformed. She played over in her mind what compliments she had received in the past, and hoped that tonight one of the servicemen would say something she had never heard before. She glanced over the crowd, and wondered which one she would choose for her special partner tonight. She never decided beforehand and left the question to fate. Somehow the idea had caught in Lucille’s head that every night’s crowd at Lake Pinchona was different from that of the previous evening or the crowd of a week ago. She maintained this belief even though she remembered many faces from previous times. She held to this transparent fiction because she liked to imagine that her reappearance every night induced unparalleled wonder in the military men who witnessed her metamorphosis.

. . .

Elinor once spoke in confidence to Billy Bronze, saying, “Queenie is worried about Lucille, and just between you and me, Billy, she has reason to be. If you wouldn’t mind, I wish you would take Frances—and Miriam if she wants to go—out to the lake once in a while and just keep an eye on Lucille. She’s going to do pretty much whatever she wants to, I know that. But it would make Queenie feel better to have somebody watching out for her a little bit.”

Thus, Billy and Frances, and even sometimes Miriam, went out to Lake Pinchona in the evening and danced. They waved to Lucille when they came in, ordered Cokes from her, smiled when she made her by now famous reentrance, and reminded her that Queenie worried when she stayed out after midnight.

Frances and Billy, without Miriam, were at the dance hall at Lake Pinchona one Saturday night shortly after their engagement. They had eaten supper with Elinor and Oscar, and afterward they had driven out to the lake. They walked hand in hand together beneath the cedars, then stood at the edge of the lake and stared at the dark water beneath the wide lily pads. On every side of them cicadas, chanting in unison, made it seem that every tree and bush sang.

At ten o’clock they went into the dance hall. The kitchen was just closing, so that the rattle of the dishes and talk of diners shouldn’t intrude upon the dancers during the later, more intimate hours of the evening.

They stepped into the screened-in dining room just as Lucille was ushering the last reluctant customer out and latching the door behind him. It had been a busy evening, and Lucille looked frazzled and distracted. “I’ve got weary bones,” she confided to Frances.

“Then maybe you should just go straight on home,” suggested Frances.

Lucille stared at her cousin in disbelief. “It’s Saturday night!” she cried, as if that explained everything.

Frances and Billy wandered off to speak to a couple of men from Eglin with whom they were acquainted. As undistracted and private in the empty dining room as a fish in its aquarium, Lucille wiped the tables clean, set up for the following evening, counted her tips, and as she was taking off her apron, winked at the black dishwasher. She made a little show of going out through the kitchen door, saying loud good-nights to the owner’s wife, who was wiping off the stove, and to the owner himself, who was taking

admissions at the door. She skipped out into the night, her shoes beating a brief hollow tattoo on the wooden gangway.

Everyone in the dance hall knew that Lucille would return within a quarter hour. If Lucille had not been as pretty as she was, the little burletta played out nightly would have seemed ridiculous. The band continued to play, but fewer people danced. All the men wanted to see Lucille's entrance. The girls whispered among themselves that the reason Lucille worked at all, when she had such rich relatives, was so that she could buy those tacky little dresses that she put on in the bathhouse every night.

This night, however, they watched in vain, because Lucille did not return.

After a half hour of waiting, Frances became nervous. She went to the owner, and said, "Where is Lucille? I didn't think she usually took this long."

The owner only replied, "She's changing down at the bathhouse. I give her a key, 'cause nobody is allowed in there at night."

"Maybe she went home," said the owner's wife as she came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her dirty apron.

"Nope," said the owner. "I'd stake my life."

Frances signaled to Billy to remain and headed out the door. Her footsteps on the gangway over the edge of the lake echoed woodenly. The moon shone that night, but nothing of its light reached through the dense canopy of cedar branches. Frances pushed open the door of the bathhouse and called Lucille's name. Only a high-pitched, stertorous breathing came in reply.

She reached above her head and pulled the chain on the metal-shaded light that hung down from the ceiling. In its harsh illumination, she saw Lucille lying twisted on the rough, puddled floor of the bathhouse. Her dress had been torn and raised up over her breasts. Her underpants had been pulled down to her ankles. Her lower belly and the inside of her thighs were bloody.

Lucille's eyes struggled to open. "Frances?" she whispered, as Frances began to pull Lucille's clothes back more or less into place.

"Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord!" Frances whispered. "Let's get you home."

"Travis Gann," said Lucille, struggling to rise. "It was Travis Gann."

"I thought he was still in jail!"

Lucille shook her head. With that motion, she lost her fragile balance, and her head dropped back against the rough wooden floor with a loud knock.

"You lie there. I'll get Billy," said Frances.

Lucille made no reply; her breathing was rough.

Frances rose, knocking her head against the light, so that it danced and threw violent shadows and shafts of light over the interior of the women's bathhouse. Frances backed out the door, unaccountably knocking her head again, this time on the top of the doorframe.

Everything was different for Frances as she left the bathhouse with the intention of returning to the dance hall and fetching Billy. For one thing, it no longer seemed night. Before, she had had to almost feel her way along the path to the bathhouse with her arms outstretched, the night dark beneath the canopy of cedar boughs. Now, on her way back, she saw as easily as she might have seen at high noon, when the sun glanced blindingly off the surface of Lake Pinchona.

She had wanted to run to bring Billy out, but something was different about her legs, that didn't allow running. She loped and swayed, and her head was thrust forward.

Everything *looked* different too: her vision was blurred, and she saw things from a different height. The ground seemed farther away.

Even as these differences registered in Frances's mind, that mind itself changed. Frances Caskey no longer had thoughts that belonged to Lucille's cousin.

Her hearing was acute. To her right, among a grove of cypresses on a little tongue of spongy land, she heard a footstep on the soft ground. Without any conscious thought, the thing that was no longer Frances Caskey turned in that direction.

At the same time, that thing caught another sound, this one much louder, an echoing footfall on the gangway from the dance hall. She—for though she was no longer Frances, she was yet *female*—slipped into the darkness, and avoided Billy on his way out to the bathhouse.

She slipped among the trees and was hidden in the darkness, her progress marked by a series of wet slaps against the cypress and cedar trunks. She heard more footfalls, then a curse word that conveyed no meaning to her altered mind, but did serve to pinpoint the location of its speaker.

She saw him long before he saw her. His form appeared vague and indistinct, but brightly lighted, as if she gazed at him on a sunlit beach through squinted eyes.

Travis Gann, standing near the shore of the lake, had turned at the unfamiliar, moist slapping noise. In the darkness, beneath the trees, he saw, indistinctly, pale, nonhuman staring eyes, a wide flat gleaming face, an enormous lipless mouth, a tall, strong form to which the tattered remnants of a girl's dress clung wetly. Vast webbed feet flapped against the ground as it came nearer. He backed against a tree and pressed as if he might push it down behind him. The tree did not fall, and Travis Gann sidled around it to the right. He lost his footing on the slippery ground and slid with a splash among the lily pads at the lake's edge. A large moth flew against his face, and he saw the frantic beating of its white, dusty wings. The mud of the lake was soft, and when he tried to stand, his feet sank deep. When he tried to scramble away, tearing at the lilies, he discovered that he was caught in the twisted underwater stems of the plants. He looked up, and the thing that had appeared to him amongst the trees a few moments before now stood above him in the moonlight. He saw it for only one moment of stark terror, for it slipped down the bank and into the water beside him.

Moving beneath the water, Frances's vision cleared. Everything was as bright as before. The lilies were a waving forest of thin brown trunks, and among them she saw the man struggling, one foot caught in the mud. She surged toward him, thrust out one arm to catch him, and in the same easy motion, pushed off toward the center of the lake.

Travis's head remained above water as he was suddenly pulled backward, free of the lilies, into the open black water of Lake Pinchona. With a fearful jerk, he remembered the alligators. Then, for an instant, he grinned. Why should he fear alligators when *this* thing had caught hold of him? The grin faded, and Travis Gann stared up at the sky. The stars raced along above him. He heard the water rushing past his ears and water poured chokingly into his open mouth.

The thing that was Frances Caskey swam out to the middle of the lake, and when it had got there it swung its other arm around Travis Gann. Holding him close, she plunged down to the muddy bottom. She held him in her embrace as a father might hold an overgrown boy on his lap. She gazed into his face as a father might have gazed.

So deep were they beneath the water that Travis could see nothing but the pale luminescence of the two eyes that stared at him. He struggled and squirmed, but was held fast. The little air remaining in his lungs was exhaled in a stifled shout. He freed one arm, made a fist, and jammed it against the wide, flat face in front of him. His fist met nothing at all. His mind registered bewilderment, and his last conscious thought was the solution to that mystery: *It opened its mouth, and my fist went right in.* Then the mouth clamped shut over Travis Gann's forearm, and the entire arm was wrenched from its socket.

Travis Gann knew nothing after that.

Frances ate both Travis's arms. Sometime in the course of that feeding, Travis Gann died. When her hunger was sated, Frances carried the corpse over to the alligator nest she knew lay at the edge of the cow pasture. Attracted by the smell of blood in the water, the alligators were there to receive him.

Frances stood up out of the water, holding aloft the armless corpse. Blood spilled from the empty sockets. Her own bloody mouth opened and she piped a series of brief shrill notes. The water all around was agitated by the thrashing tails of the alligators—and her own. Somewhere, in a dark corner of the creature's mind, Frances Caskey was startled to hear the shrill piping song that she remembered from her dreams.

Frances Caskey sang, and Travis Gann was tumbled into the alligators' nest on the banks of Lake Pinchona.

Chapter 53

Mother and Daughter

When Billy reached the bathhouse, he found Lucille as Frances had left her only minutes before. He gathered Lucille up into his arms and hurried along the cedar path with her, pausing once behind a tree to allow a knot of soldiers to pass. He slipped out to the parking lot, laid Lucille across the back seat of the car, and covered her with a blanket from the trunk. Returning to the dance hall with as much nonchalance as he could muster, he reassured the owner and his wife that all was well. Lucille had merely fallen prey to an upset stomach, and he was taking her home. He stood just outside the door of the dance hall, causing the gangway to creak beneath his weight as he shifted back and forth in confusion and nervousness. The yellow light from within spilled out in discrete squares all around the building, but did not dispel the darkness. The moon was now obscured by clouds.

Billy could easily imagine that Frances had fled in silent hysteria when she found her cousin in that horrifying condition in the bathhouse. He went back to the car, hoping Frances would be there. She was not. Lucille moaned softly. Billy got into the car, unsure as to what he should do. Lucille might require medical attention, but he did not want to leave without Frances. He got out of the car, cautioning an unheedful Lucille of the necessity of remaining quiet.

Billy returned to the bathhouse and softly called Frances's name. When there was no reply, he decided to search further. Keeping clear of the dance hall, he entered the grove of cedar and cypress at the edge of the lake. The music from the dance hall was frequently drowned out by the noise of the cicadas anchored in the bark of the trees. He went to the edge of the water. The moon came out from behind a cloud, and shone upon the lake.

"Frances?" he called.

A head broke the surface of the water about fifty feet from shore. It wasn't Frances—it wasn't even human. It disappeared so quickly that Billy told himself that he'd imagined it—even though he was certain he hadn't. While he was telling himself, *it was just an alligator,* he noticed a trail forming itself in ripples on the surface of the calm black water of the lake.

The trail came toward him. He backed away into the darkness and security of the trees.

It saw me.

Frances rose among the lily pads and weakly called Billy's name.

He rushed forward, and pulled his fiancée up onto the land. She had lost her shoes and her feet were covered with mud. Her dress and underclothes hung from her in shreds. Billy took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"Shhh!" he said, when she looked as though she was about to speak. "Let's just get back to the car."

On the way home, Frances was silent. She did not explain how she had come to be in the lake, or why so little was left of her dress. Billy did not press the matter. He pulled up in front of Elinor's house, got out and hurried inside, cautioning Frances and Lucille to remain in the car. He brought out Elinor and Zaddie with blankets, and the two young women were soon installed in the bedrooms upstairs. Queenie was telephoned and arrived in a few minutes.

Travis Gann, Lucille said, had raped her. He had been waiting for her just outside the bathhouse. He had grabbed her by the shoulders, pushed her inside, knocked her to the floor, pulled up her dress, ripped off her pants, and punctured her hymen in his first thrust.

Queenie's eyebrows were raised—she had not imagined that the thing had been intact. It was only then so much the worse for her poor daughter.

Frances would see no one but her mother. Elinor took Frances into the bathroom and kneeled beside the bathtub to bathe her daughter tenderly. In a low, distant voice, Frances told her mother all she remembered about her experience at the lake.

"Mama, I killed him."

"He was a terrible man," said Elinor reassuringly. "He raped Lucille. He got Malcolm in trouble."

"But I *killed* him."

"Nobody knows that, darling, except you and me. And even if anybody knew, do you think they'd do anything but give you a medal?" Elinor gave a low laugh. "What do you think Queenie would say? Queenie would say, 'Frances, I've got to kiss you for killing that old Travis Gann, now we're not ever going to have to see his ugly face again.' Stand up, darling."

Frances stood obediently, as of old, with her feet a little apart. Her mother began to rub her belly with a soapy cloth.

"You know what, Mama?" said Frances, when Elinor had begun washing her right leg.

"What?"

"It's not even so much the business about killing Travis Gann..."

"What is it, then?"

"It's *how* I did it."

"What do you mean *how?"*

"How?" repeated Frances. "I dragged him down to the bottom of the lake. And I bit off his arms. I got his arms *inside my mouth* and I bit them off. I ate both his arms."

Elinor said, "Give me your foot, baby."

Frances obediently raised her leg and placed it on the edge of the bathtub for her mother to wash.

Mechanically, when this was done, Frances turned around, and her mother began on her left leg.

"What's wrong, darling?" asked Elinor after a bit. "What are you thinking of?"

"I'm trying to remember if that was exactly what happened. It couldn't have happened that way really, could it? Already it seems like a dream."

"It was a bad dream," returned her mother. "Now turn this way, face me." Frances did so. Her mother stood, looked at Frances, and held her gaze. Elinor took her daughter's arm in her right hand, and with the other she began to wash between Frances's legs. "Do you know what really happened out at the lake?" Frances shook her head. "You found Lucille," said Elinor slowly, and went on with deliberateness, "and then you ran to get Billy so that he could help get her out of there. But Travis Gann was lying in wait for you, and he attacked you and tore off your clothes and when you tried to run away from him you fell in the water. You couldn't see because it was so dark. Travis came in after you, but he couldn't swim as well as you could and the alligators came and got him."

France's gaze, which had turned glassy, hardened into focus. "Yes, ma'am," she said quietly.

Elinor sighed, dropped the washcloth, and embraced her naked daughter. "I'm so sorry, darling. I'm so sorry it had to happen *this* way!"

Frances was stiff in her arms. When Elinor let go, Frances said, “It *did* happen, though, what I really remember.”

Elinor nodded.

“Stand out of the bathtub, darling, and let me dry you off.”

Frances did so. She said, “It was horrible, Mama.”

Elinor, who had taken a fresh towel from the rack, looked at Frances in surprise. “No, it wasn’t,” she said. “You just say that now. But were you hurt? Were you frightened? Were you ever in danger?”

“I don’t remember...”

Elinor shook her head. “You weren’t, darling, not for one minute.” She placed the towel around Frances’s shoulders and began to rub. “That old Travis Gann could never have hurt you, not when you were...”

“Were what?”

“Were the way you were when you got out in the water.”

“It didn’t happen in the water, Mama. It happened in the bathhouse, right after I found Lucille.”

Elinor nodded. She dropped to her knees again and continued to towel Frances dry. “That’s because you were upset. You were upset on Lucille’s account. I don’t blame you, either. Not one little bit.”

“Mama, is this ever gone happen again?”

Elinor didn’t answer. She stood up, tossed the towel into the corner of the bathroom, and took a robe from a hook on the door. “Put this on. Let’s go in the other room and let me brush your hair.”

“Mama,” said Frances calmly, as she allowed herself to be led into the next room, “you got to tell me this time. You cain’t keep on putting me off and putting me off when I ask you about things. Not after what happened tonight. *I killed somebody,”* she whispered.

Oscar and Billy were sitting on the screened-in porch, onto which opened the window of Frances’s room. Oscar, when he saw the light come on, came over to the window and peered in. “Elinor,” he said, “is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” returned Elinor, guiding her daughter to the vanity. Frances sat woodenly on the wicker seat before the triptych mirror.

“What the hell happened out there?”

“Travis Gann,” said Elinor.

“Are we gone have to call the police?”

“No!” said Elinor sharply. “Oscar, will you just let Frances and me alone for a while? I will come out there a little later and tell everybody what happened and explain what we’re going to do. Don’t you trust me?”

Oscar shrugged. “Billy and me are sitting here on our hands and we just don’t know *what* to do next.”

“Fine,” said Elinor, “you just continue with that.” Despite the heat of the evening, Elinor pulled down the window in her husband’s face and snapped the curtains shut. She returned to her daughter. Frances sat with her hands in her lap, blankly staring at her triple reflection in the mirrors. Elinor picked up a brush and began pulling it through the thick ropes of her daughter’s damp hair.

“Frances,” said Elinor quietly, smiling down at her daughter’s reflection as she brushed, “what you’ve got to do is calm down, because in just a little while you and I are going to have to go out on the porch and talk to Oscar and Billy and Queenie. You’re going to have to tell them what happened out at the lake. They’re going to expect you to be a little upset, but they’re not going to want to listen to any wild stories.”

“Mama,” sighed Frances, looking neither at herself nor at her mother, but staring instead at the little lamp with the fringed shade, “you don’t think I’d go to *anybody* with a story like that, do you?”

“I hope not. Who’d believe you? Nobody would. *I* wouldn’t even believe you.” Elinor gave a little laugh.

“Mama, it’s not funny.”

“Frances, darling, you act like this has never happened before—that’s what I can’t understand.”

Frances looked up at her mother’s reflection in astonishment.

After a few moments, Elinor said quietly, “I see what it is. You don’t remember...”

“Don’t remember?”

“The other times.”

“What other times, Mama?”

“The other times when you went out in the water.”

“You mean,” said Frances hesitantly, “I had that *change*...?”

Elinor nodded. “Of course. When you used to go down to the Gulf with Miriam, and you’d swim and swim for hours and hours—you don’t think a sixteen-year-old girl could swim out that far, do you? A sixteen-year-old girl who had spent three years of her life in that bed right over

there, not even able to move her legs when she wanted to? You remember when you were little and you and I used to go swimming in the Perdido together, and we wouldn't let anybody else go with us? Remember that?"

"A little," admitted Frances. "I don't remember that anything happened, though. I just remember..."

"What?"

"Nothing, Mama. That's just it. I can't remember anything about it. Just that everything was different."

Elinor nodded sagely.

"That's it, then," said Frances mournfully. "When I'm in the water, and I can't remember things, that's what happens to me?"

"That's right."

"But tonight I remembered more."

Elinor shrugged. "More things happened, and you were upset. And also you're getting older."

"Then this *is* all gone happen again?"

Elinor only went on with her brushing. She didn't answer.

After a moment, Frances said delicately, "Mama?"

"Yes?"

"Mama, not everybody is like this..."

"No, darling, just you and me."

"Not Miriam?"

Elinor shook her head. "Remember when I said that *you* were my real little girl? That's what I meant."

Frances sat very still and stared at her visage in the mirror. She raised her arm and turned it in the light, inspecting it.

"You won't see anything, darling," said Elinor.

"What about Billy?"

"What about him?" asked Elinor. She put aside the brush and opened a little gilt box with bobby pins inside. She pulled back a thick wave of Frances's hair and reached for a pin. Frances held the wave in place until her mother had secured it.

"Can I still marry him?"

"Of course! I married your father, didn't I?"

Frances shrugged. "What do I tell him?"

"Don't tell him anything!" cried Elinor. "What do you imagine you would say to him?"

“I don’t know!” exclaimed Frances helplessly. She spun around on the wicker seat and looked at her mother directly. “Mama, I don’t understand *any* of this, and you’ve got to help me! You’ve got to tell me what to do!”

Elinor took Frances’s shoulders, squeezed them, and said, “You’re doing everything just right. If you have any problems, you come to me. That’s all. Now turn around and let me finish doing your hair. They’re waiting for us!”

“Why fix it at all?”

“Because when we go out on the porch, and you see Billy again, I don’t want him to remember anything of what you looked like out at the lake. I just want him to see my pretty, pretty little girl.”

“Mama, does Daddy know?”

“Know about what?”

“About me?”

“No.”

“About you?”

Elinor paused. “Oscar knows more than he’s willing to say. Your daddy is a good man, darling, and he’s very smart. Your daddy knows when to be quiet. Billy is just like him, don’t you think?”

Frances didn’t answer. Another question already occupied her mind.

“What about children?”

“What about them?” asked Elinor, looking this way and that at Frances’s reflection, checking her hair.

“Will they be like us?”

Elinor smiled. “You’re all done,” she said, “and you’ve asked enough questions for one evening. Let’s go out on the porch and get this business over with.”

Chapter 54

Lucille and Grace

Lucille stayed in bed a week after her rape, nursed by all the Caskey women. Townfolk were told that at Lake Pinchona, in the dark, Lucille had tripped over the root of a cedar tree, fallen, and cut herself on a nail sticking out of a post.

The owner of the recreation facilities at Lake Pinchona and his wife had their suspicions, of course, but they had no interest in spreading news of a rape. If it had become known that a local girl had been attacked by an Air Corps man—it was *bound* to have been a soldier, since for the past year it was mostly soldiers who had come to the lake—there would have been hell to pay. The lake might have been put off limits by the commander at Eglin, and where would the couple's comfortable profits have gone?

Another waitress was hired, a girl from Bay Minette who wasn't nearly so pretty as Lucille and had never learned to dance. After she had recovered from her "fall," Lucille wasn't at all interested in returning to her former position.

No trace of Travis Gann ever turned up in the lake or on its shores. Perdido assumed that Travis, in the due course of justice, had been released from Atmore prison and had simply disappeared. Perdido was glad that he had taken up residence someplace far away.

A couple of months later, Queenie found that the full force of her old bad luck had come upon her again. Lucille was pregnant. On Elinor's advice, Lucille had been examined not by Dr. Benquith next door but rather by a man in Pensacola. The Caskeys hadn't wanted their friend Leo to know what had occurred out at Lake Pinchona. "I know pregnancy when I see it," said Queenie. "In another couple of months she'll start to show."

One evening at James's there was a conference of the Caskey women, with only Frances and Miriam excused. Lucille was brought over to the house, but relegated to Grace's bedroom with the door closed. The question "What do we do?" was what the women had gathered to decide.

Grace looked around with pleasure. This was her first major family conference; she was proud to have been admitted to it. Here she might give

her maiden speech, and she wanted the family to remember it. “Let me take her away,” said Grace.

“Take her where?” said Sister.

“It doesn’t matter. Miami, maybe, or Tennessee. It doesn’t really matter where. Tell people she’s visiting relatives, or she’s keeping me company on a tour of the national parks, something like that.”

“You can’t travel around much,” Elinor pointed out, “remember there’s a war going on.”

“Then we’ll sit in one place,” said Grace. “A place where nobody knows us.”

“For nine months?” said Queenie. “You’d stay with Lucille for nine months?”

“It wouldn’t be nine, it’d be more like seven.”

“What would you do with the baby when it’s born?” asked Sister.

Grace shrugged. “I don’t know. She cain’t keep it, I guess. Then there’d be no reason to go away and keep it a secret. Put it up for adoption, I suppose.”

“I wish we could keep it...” sighed Queenie. “Maybe we could give it to James.”

“James is too old,” said Elinor, not unkindly, “to care for a baby. And if we were to keep it, everybody would know where it came from. We’ll have to give it away.”

Grace soon understood that they had accepted the wisdom of her proposal and that she would take Lucille away for the duration of the pregnancy. She said then, “We can decide about the baby later. First we have to decide how Lucille and I are gone get out of town without anybody suspecting anything. See, first she’s gone have to quit that job at the Ben Franklin...”

It was arranged that evening. Lucille was informed and acquiesced in everything. She was a changed girl since the rape; not dour, but distracted. She no longer lied because there didn’t seem to be anything in life worth lying for. She no longer whined to get her way. She looked at Grace and said, “Are you gone take care of me?”

“Yes,” said Grace. “Where had you rather go, Nashville or Miami?”

Lucille shrugged.

“Nashville, then,” said Grace. “We can tell everybody we’re visiting your relatives, Queenie.”

“They’re all dead,” said Queenie.

“All the better,” said Grace. “Then we won’t be disturbed.”

. . .

Perdido heard only that Grace and Lucille, who had never been close before, were going off to Nashville for an indefinite stay. There was something mysterious in this, if only because it seemed so unlikely that Grace would leave her father completely alone in Perdido, when James was still grieving in the wake of Danjo’s absence. Perdido learned nothing except that questions were unwelcome.

James demanded a single alteration in the plan. He would not hear of his daughter going so far away as Nashville. He wanted Grace and Lucille hidden away a little closer to home. Oscar, thinking the matter over, said, “You know what? Right after Mama died and we bought all that land over in Escambia County—y’all remember? Elinor had me buy up a little piece of property that had been foreclosed on. It’s maybe five, ten miles south of Babylon, off this little road that doesn’t go anywhere at all. You never saw anyplace so far away from anything in your life. Elinor, you and I drove over there one day, remember?”

Elinor remembered it well. “The place is called Gavin Pond,” she said. “There’s an old farmhouse next to a fishing pond. Plenty of artesian water around there. It’s got a pasture and a pecan orchard, and five, six hundred acres of decent timber. The Perdido River is the western boundary of the property.”

“Y’all never even mentioned this place before,” said James.

Oscar said, “After Mama died and left us her money, Elinor and I were buying up property right and left. Well, it looks like it might come in handy now. Gavin Pond—I’d even forgot the name of it.”

“How long does it take to get there from here?” asked Grace.

“Half an hour, maybe,” said Elinor. “Take the road over to Babylon, and then south, that’s all.”

“Daddy,” said Grace, “you and Queenie would be able to come see us all the time. Elinor, what shape was that old farmhouse in last time you were there?”

“It was all right,” said Elinor. “But by now it could probably use some work. I’ll drive over tomorrow, and take Bray along and see what all needs to be done before you can move in.”

Elinor and Bray began work the next day. In the following week, Bray killed a family of squirrels in the second-floor bedrooms and repaired a hole in the roof. He put new steps on the back, and shored up the narrow front porch. Meanwhile, early every morning, before the rest of Perdido was awake, Elinor and Sister tied furniture to the back of a small mill truck and had Bray drive it out to the place. It had been decided that the purchase of new furniture—either in Perdido or Babylon—would have excited too much local curiosity. Queenie went to the Crawford's store, filled her car with groceries, and stocked the kitchen. The Caskeys visited the house by ones and twos and nobody in Perdido learned anything of it, or suspected the Caskeys' scheme. Lucille quit her job at the Ben Franklin, and was not sorry to do so. She no longer had any interest in flirting with the servicemen who wandered in for a bag of peanut clusters or a Mounds bar.

In the middle of August, when the house was finally judged ready, Queenie drove her daughter down to Pensacola to a beauty parlor. Lucille's hair was cut short and then dyed black. They came back to Perdido only after night had fallen. From there Lucille and Grace drove off with half a dozen suitcases in the back seat. The Caskeys remained inside their houses as the car pulled away from James's house, and Lucille crouched low in the seat as they drove through downtown Perdido, crossed the bridge over the river, and went through Baptist Bottom on the road that led eastward to Florida. Lucille wept.

. . .

Babylon in 1943 was a tiny place, smaller than Perdido, without a mill or any other major business to make it profitable, and nothing to distinguish it but the three young men who in the past three years had all gone on to play professional baseball. The Caskey property lay five miles south of town, out a gravel road through the colored section. Two pebbly ruts led away from that road through a hardwood forest; half a mile farther along this track they came to the clearing with the farmhouse in it. Behind the farmhouse was the cattle pasture, where only deer had grazed for twenty years, and the pecan orchard with a little stream running through it. The orderly rows had been disturbed by oak saplings growing up anarchically in their midst. Beside the house was the fishing pond, filled with fish that had fed and grown and multiplied for undisturbed generations. The pond was bordered by dark, moss-hung cypresses. All this, of course, was not apparent in the deep night of Grace and Lucille's arrival. They saw only the ruts of the track, the

trunks of trees, and the lowest clapboards of the house in the wavering lights of the headlamps.

The modest house had two rooms up and two rooms down, with a pantry and bath on the first floor. Elinor had run up curtains for the windows. The floors were hardwood, and Zaddie and Luvadia had scrubbed them. None of this operation had been kept secret from the Sapps. They would have found out anyway, and the Caskeys considered them all family, trusting them as they trusted themselves. But despite all these small attempts to make the place seem comfortable and familiar, Lucille thought she had never been in a place so removed and lonely in her life. All the windows looked out on blackness.

Lucille clung to Grace. "I'm scared."

"We'll go upstairs," said Grace, "and I'll show you our bedrooms."

Lucille turned to Grace in terror. "I cain't sleep by myself. Not way out here!"

The bedrooms upstairs were square and unadorned, a bed, a dresser, a vanity, and a hooked rug in each. In the day they might be cheerful enough, with sunlight beating in through the high windows, but at night they were stuffy with the day's heat. The single overhead bulb in each room lighted the rooms poorly, casting harsh shadows, and picking out the dead flies that littered the windowsill and the wasps' nest in the corner of the ceiling of Grace's room.

"I hate it here," said Lucille.

"Tomorrow I'll take you fishing," said Grace. "We'll have the time of our lives."

Lucille shook her head doubtfully. Neither that night nor the nights that followed would Lucille permit Grace to sleep in her own room. She insisted that they share the same bed. Lucille was frightened of the dark and the overwhelming quiet outside. The silence was broken only by the occasional *plop* of a fish in the pond, or the crackle of breaking twigs as animals roamed through the forest. When she looked out she saw only the cold moon over Babylon reflected in the water of Gavin Pond. On the other side of the pond was a tiny graveyard with a dozen tombstones under which were buried all the members of the family who had built the farmhouse, and who had slept in the room she slept in now. No, Lucille wasn't sleeping by herself. All night long she cowered in Grace's arms, despite the heat and the closeness of the room. She was never certain in what her fear was centered,

whether it was the quiet and the dark, or the pond and the graveyard and the moonlight—or whether it was the thing that was expanding inside her belly.

Things were better during the day. The house had cooled off somewhat during the night. The disposition of the trees kept sunlight off the roof until late afternoon, but then the place quickly heated up. Lucille listened to the radio and played records, sat in the boat and slapped at mosquitos while Grace fished, wandered in the pecan orchard with a big stick poised to beat off snakes, and sometimes did a little sewing. "I keep wanting to do something for the baby," she confessed to Grace, "and then all of a sudden I remember I'm not gone keep him. I bet it *is* a him and not a her."

They weren't as lonely as Lucille had anticipated on the night of their arrival. The Caskeys came out to see them, sometimes James and Queenie, sometimes Elinor and Zaddie, sometimes Sister alone. The visitors sat in chairs placed out by the pond, and everyone would say how pleasant it was, and it was just a wonder they hadn't thought of fixing up this place before. It was *much* nicer than the beach. Twice Oscar drove out in the middle of the day, saying he had just had to get away from the mill; all that business was driving him crazy. Only Frances and Miriam did not come. Once, when they were out on the pond fishing, Lucille asked Grace why she thought her cousins stayed away. Grace at first didn't answer. Then after a few moments she said, "They think you and I are in Nashville."

"You mean everybody's keeping this a secret, even from them?"

"They're too young. They might let it out, without intending to," explained Grace.

For some reason, this depressed Lucille. She seemed to see in Frances and Miriam's ignorance of her plight the real extent of her shame. She cried, "It's not my fault! I didn't ask that man to jump on top of me in the bathhouse!"

Grace pulled a fish into the boat. She was about to give up the fishing —in such a pond as this, it was no sport at all. Besides, something in the water gave the fish a rancid taste, no matter how soon they were cooked, as if they had fed off only the dead fish that had sunk to the bottom. "Of course it's not your fault, Lucille. Who said it was your fault?"

"Then why am I being punished?"

"You call a vacation like this punishment?"

"I do, when I cain't even go into Babylon with you."

“How often do I go in? Once a week, maybe. Queenie brings us food. I don’t even like to go in town.”

“I feel like I’m in jail. Nobody asked me what *I* wanted to do about all this.”

Grace looked up in surprise. “Did you want to keep this child? When you know that its father was that no-good Travis Gann? Let’s just hope Frances is right and those alligators out at Lake Pinchona *did* eat him up!”

Lucille looked away. “I don’t know what I wanted to do. I wasn’t thinking straight. I’m not thinking straight now.”

“Pull down your hat,” said Grace. “You’re getting too much sun on your face.”

“Why are we out here?” demanded Lucille suddenly. “Why cain’t we let anybody know?”

“For one simple reason,” returned Grace. “We don’t want anybody to know what happened to you. And the reason for that is not ’cause *we’re* ashamed, but because of what would happen to you if everybody did find out. Travis Gann jumping on top of you is not your fault, you’re right, but if it comes out that he did it, and you got pregnant, everybody’s gone look at you different. And they’d certainly treat that little baby different. I’d be surprised if you could ever get married after that. Perdido’s mean about things like that. People everywhere are, I guess. Men don’t want to marry damaged goods, and that’s what you’d be, if anybody found out. Damaged goods.”

“I don’t care!” cried Lucille. “I don’t want to get married. Not ever.”

Grace laughed. “Lucille Strickland! I have seen you flirt with every man who came within a three-mile radius of that candy counter at the Ben Franklin. I have seen you try on your mama’s wedding ring time and time again just to see what it looked like! Don’t tell me you aren’t interested in getting married.”

“I’m not, though.” She looked around, at the pond, at the graveyard, at the house, at the sky, as if in puzzlement that such a decision had been made in her mind without her having had a single thing to say in the matter. “I’m not, though,” she repeated softly. “Maybe this place isn’t so bad after all. It’s just a little lonely out here, that’s all.”

“You sound just like Daddy,” said Grace. “Y’all act like I wasn’t even around to keep y’all company. I think I’m gone pick this fish up and wave it in your ungrateful face!”

As she did so, Lucille laughed and squealed, and cried, “No, don’t do it! Please don’t do it, Grace!”

Chapter 55

Tommy Lee Burgess

Three times Lucille was taken to see a doctor in Pensacola, and every time was assured that the pregnancy was proceeding in perfect order. The doctor predicted that the child would be healthy and—considering the size of Lucille's belly—large. Elinor and Sister had quietly expected that through impatience and loneliness Lucille would give up their careful charade and return to Perdido, pregnant and unmarried, leaving Queenie to bear up under the scandal. Queenie secretly expected that, too. Yet, as the family made its visits to Gavin Pond it became apparent that Lucille was settling in, that she was not the girl she had been, and that her life had altered in unforeseen ways. She was becoming content with her straitened lot in the remote farmhouse south of Babylon.

During that autumn Lucille did not chafe at her loneliness. She did not pine for the company of young Air Corps men, or for her female chums at the Ben Franklin and Lake Pinchona. She seemed content to sit in the house all day, embroidering pillowcases and nightgowns while Grace explored the property she had come to feel was hers. Each thought the company of the other was sufficient. Queenie, Elinor, and Sister sometimes felt they were an intrusion on the cherished solitude of the cousins.

Who had ever known Lucille to do anything so painstaking and sedate and long-lasting as embroidery? Next, wonder of wonders, she took up dressmaking. She asked her mother once if they could afford a sewing machine. The next day James and Bray brought a Singer in one of the mill trucks. The Perdido visitors always brought Lucille lengths of fabric and a new dress pattern, in her size or in Grace's. Lucille was filling the closets of the farmhouse with homemade dresses.

Grace said she wished she had lived in the country all her life. When her birthday came up in January, James had asked his daughter what she wanted. Grace replied, "A tractor." He bought her one, and Grace set about restoring the pecan orchard to its former splendor. One afternoon in February, Bray drove James and Queenie out to Gavin Pond, and they sat in the living room of the farmhouse talking with their respective daughters. Grace had constructed her cousin an adjustable embroidery frame. In the

advanced months of her pregnancy, Lucille had found it difficult to sit up for long periods of time. She lay on one of the sofas in the room, with the frame tilted at just the right angle over her extended belly, so that she could continue her work without strain. To Queenie and James's astonishment, Grace talked of the time—after the arrival of the baby—when she and Lucille would drive over to Georgia and buy a few head of cattle. Grace was certain that within a year she could turn Gavin Pond—as the entire tract of land was, imprecisely, called—into a paying proposition.

"Grace," cried Queenie, "you mean you are thinking of *living* out here!"

"We love it here," said Grace. "And after all this work..."

"James," put in Lucille, "do you have an old rug you don't want? Something for this room. I was thinking..."

"Blue," said James. "It'd have to be blue."

"Wait a minute," said Queenie. "James, don't start putting rugs in here until we get all this straight."

"Get what straight, Mama?" Lucille asked.

"Do you *like* it here, darling?"

"Mama," said Lucille contentedly, slipping her needle into the fabric she was working on, "we just love it."

"Don't you miss the town?"

Lucille shook her head. "We've got the radio, and that's all there is to do in Perdido anyway. After the baby comes, Grace said she'd take me over to DeFuniak Springs to the movies any time we wanted to go. If I went back to Perdido I'd have to go back to work at the Ben Franklin. I've got lazy. I don't want to work. James, next time somebody comes out here, can you send that rug with them?"

"Lucille is dying for that rug, Daddy."

"What else would you like to have?" asked James. "I guess you want to fix this place up nice, don't you?"

This abrupt change in Lucille Strickland was only a two-hours' wonder in the Caskey family. No one thought it strange that Grace and Lucille should take up housekeeping together, and each be perfectly happy in the sole company of the other. It was only thought peculiar that they should want to keep house at Gavin Pond. No Caskey had ever lived in the country.

"My little girl," said James, "wants to be a farmer. More power to her."

“And my little girl,” said Queenie, “wants to be a farmer’s wife. Who would have thought it?”

“I guess,” said Sister, “that when the baby comes, and they give it away, then we can just tell everybody that Grace has bought a farm out in the country and that Lucille is out there keeping her from getting lonesome.”

“And everybody will think they’re *both* out of their minds,” sighed Elinor.

No one in the family dissuaded Grace and Lucille from their course. Every time someone went over to visit, he took some household object with him: a lamp, or small table, or a box of books. “First thing we are gone do is fix up the guest room,” said Lucille once when her mother had come for a visit, “so that anytime any of you wants to stay overnight you can.”

Queenie looked up, surprised, and said, “But there are only two bedrooms in this house, one for you and one for Grace. Where is the guest room?”

“Oh, Mama,” laughed Lucille. “Grace and I sleep together! You don’t think I’d sleep all by myself way out here in the country, do you? You know how scared I get.”

The Caskeys absorbed this somewhat startling information too. Everyone remembered that as a child, Lucille had suffered from recurrent nightmares.

Perhaps with all these small surprises along the way, the Caskeys should have been prepared for the bombshell that appeared at the end, but they were not.

When the time approached for Lucille to give birth, Ivey Sapp came to stay at Gavin Pond, sleeping on a cot in the kitchen. To maintain secrecy regarding the pregnancy, no doctor was to be called in. Without complication, and in the bed she shared with Grace Caskey, Lucille Strickland delivered a perfect male baby, who weighed about as much as a five-pound sack of flour, according to Ivey’s trustworthy estimate.

Queenie, James, Elinor, and Sister arrived an hour later, and looked at the child.

“We’re calling him Thomas Lee,” said Grace proudly, standing by Lucille at the head of the bed. “Hey there, Tommy Lee!”

“There is no point in naming the child,” said Queenie. “You ought to let his new parents give him a name. They may already have a boy called

Tommy."

"New parents?" cried Lucille. "Who said anything about new parents?" She held the infant protectively against her breast.

Queenie, James, Elinor, and Sister all stared at one another.

"You...mean," said Elinor slowly, "that you intend on...*keeping* this child?"

"He is a *pretty* boy!" said James. *"I'd* keep him."

"James," said Sister, "you would keep any child that came your way. I am surprised you haven't been taken up for kidnapping."

Elinor looked at the two young women. She sighed. "Let's get it straight, then," she said. "First of all, you want to stay out here in this godforsaken place..."

"Yes, ma'am," said Grace staunchly.

Lucille nodded diffidently.

"And you want to keep the baby."

"He's ours!" cried Lucille.

"Darling," said Queenie, "we're only thinking of what's best for you."

The four elder Caskeys, like a tribunal, glanced at one another once and then twice, looked at Grace, Lucille, and Tommy Lee, and glanced at one another again. As head of the family, Elinor spoke. "Of course you can keep the child, and of course you can stay on out here. You're both over twenty-one and you can both do whatever you want to do. We just want you both to be happy. Now are you *sure* this is what is going to make you happy?"

"Yes," both answered as one voice.

"Then tell us," said Elinor, "what we're supposed to say in Perdido."

"What do you mean?" asked Grace.

"I am surprised," said Elinor, "that we have been able to keep all this secret for as long as we have, what with long-distance telephone calls, and Bray driving truckloads of furniture out here all the time and buying up all the material in downtown Perdido so Lucille can sew dresses. We can't keep it secret forever, and besides we wouldn't want to. We'd want the two of you and Tommy Lee to come see us, too. So what are we supposed to say when people come up to us and say, 'That's a precious little baby boy! What cloud did *he* drop out of?'"

"I don't suppose you'd want to say you were raped at Lake Pinchona," said Queenie.

“Shhhh!” said Grace. “Of course not.”

“We could say she got married, and that’s why she went off,” suggested James. “And we could say her husband got killed in the war. And then she found out she was pregnant and this is her little boy. We could say that.”

“That’s a good story,” said Lucille. “People would believe that.”

And so they did.

Eventually, Frances and Miriam were admitted to the family confidence and told the truth. Frances was taken completely by surprise, but know-it-all Miriam said, “I would have had to be blind, deaf, and stupid not to have figured the whole thing out.”

“Why didn’t you say you knew, then?” said Sister, dubious.

“It wasn’t any of my business,” returned Miriam. “I just hope nobody expects me to go out there and see them, that’s all.”

“Why not?” said James.

“Because my idea of a good time is not a stagnant pond that breeds mosquitoes and a house that’s filled with bugs and a baby crying in the next room, that’s why.”

“It’s real pleasant out at the pond,” said James in mild reproof, “and Tommy Lee is the sweetest baby I have ever laid eyes on. I’m gone make Bray drive me out there every day.”

“You cain’t do that, James,” said Queenie peremptorily. “Those two girls want to be alone with their baby. I never saw two people happier together. They don’t want you and me bouncing in on ’em every morning, noon, and night.”

Learning about the situation, Billy Bronze was able to help. He surreptitiously went through some files at Eglin and found the name of a boy who had been at the base at the time of the rape, and who had subsequently died in the South Pacific. His name was LeRoy Burgess, and he had no next-of-kin. LeRoy Burgess became the posthumous husband of Lucille and the father of Tommy Lee.

On the first of July, 1944, Lucille’s child was christened Tommy Lee Burgess in the First Methodist Church of Perdido, with the boy’s mother and Grace standing together at the baptismal font. There was a little reception at Elinor’s afterward, and if Perdido didn’t believe the story the Caskeys told, Perdido at least had the courtesy not to say so. Grace said to everyone, “Soon as Tommy Lee is old enough, Lucille and I are gone toss

him in the back seat and drive out to Oklahoma and buy us some Black Angus heifers. Nothing takes to a pecan pasture like a Black Angus...”

Chapter 56

Lazarus

Even though Germany hadn't surrendered to the Allies, the war seemed to be winding down. Perdido felt it because the nearby air base felt it. Teenage boys were still being trained and sent off to Europe and to the Pacific, but one could sense that things had changed; unmistakably, the war was coming to an end. Orders for lumber, posts, and window sashes continued to pour in, however, and the Caskeys' prosperity gave no sign of slackening. Miriam worked ever more closely with her father at the mill; the workers had long before grown accustomed to seeing her there. She was no longer simply Mr. Oscar's girl, she was Miss Miriam, and respected in her own right.

The operation of the Caskey Mill was in two parts. The exterior portion included the mill-yard with all its machinery, workers, and storage facilities as well as the forests and the vehicles and other means by which lumber was transported. The interior portion consisted of the offices in the center of the mill-yard, the workers in the office, the files, the paperwork, the hired accountants and lawyers, and the dealings with customers. That the sole customer at this time continued to be the United States War Department made the running of the concern no easier.

In her three years there, Miriam had nearly taken over the entire internal operation of the mill. Even Elinor, who somehow managed to keep close tabs on the mill without ever setting foot within its boundaries, knew that Miriam had accomplished this not through subtle maneuverings against her father and over the heads of the employees, but completely through her own competence and energy. Because Oscar was so often off somewhere in the forest, or attending to some piece of business out of town, employees had gone to Miriam with their problems instead of to Oscar. Miriam's sensible and sound replies, commands, and advice were always seconded by her father upon his return. Miriam soon became more than simply Oscar's representative; he came more and more to rely upon his daughter in the routine matters of the running of the mill. He built her an office next to his, and he gave her her own secretary and telephone line. Calls from the outside were routed automatically to her now. She was as decisive in all her

dealings as any man in Perdido might have been in her place. She worked longer hours than her father, but it was in fact her dedication to the mill that allowed Oscar to take a little ease after so many years of unrelieved toil.

Considering the early hostilities that had separated Miriam from her parents for so many years, Oscar and Miriam were more intimate than anyone in Perdido would ever have thought possible. Theirs was not the intimacy of a father with his daughter, but that of a proud businessman with his promising young partner. After breakfast in the morning, Oscar went next door for a second cup of coffee with Miriam before Bray drove them to the mill together. Sister left the room, knowing that they would talk only business. Bray brought them home at noon, and for a brief time they were part of the larger Caskey family, and refrained from speaking of the mill, except in general terms. After lunch, Miriam returned to the mill while her father lingered at home or drove out into the Caskey forests or went on business to Eglin, Pensacola, or Mobile. After supper, Oscar and Miriam sometimes went off together, sitting on Miriam's side porch or walking together out behind the houses, talking of the mill and the infinite minutiae of the business.

Though she became accustomed to spending a great deal of time with her father, Miriam had no more to do with her mother than she'd had all her life. A great distance remained between them; Miriam was close only to her father. When younger, this distance had shown itself in silence, in her solitude, in her constant cold-shouldering. Now, when she was so often thrown in with her family, such methods would not do. She instead relied on an abruptness of manner, a curtness of speech, an aloof expression, and a general lack of interest in the family good unless it was consistent with the good of the Caskey mills. This harshness was accepted by Miriam's family, just as every other aberration was accepted by the Caskeys. No one sought to change her, no one considered that she would be better off if she softened her ways. Elinor once said, "That's the way Miriam is. Everybody ought to be grateful that she'll sit at the same table with us." There had been some sotto voce complaints in the town and among the mill workers—among those who did not really know Miriam—about a young woman's being given so much power and responsibility, but Oscar Caskey never considered reining in his daughter's ambition. All in the family were proud of her for what she was doing. It was no more peculiar for Miriam to want to work ten hours a day at a desk in the dusty mill-yard, with nothing to see out her

window but stacks of lumber and nothing to hear but the chippers and the saws, than for Grace and Lucille to want to live out at Gavin Pond and sleep in the same narrow bed with a one-year-old boy and two smelly bird dogs.

Miriam appeared hard and peremptory to those who worked in the office of the mill, but to her family she had definitely softened. She had grown up a child indulged in every conceivable way by her grandmother Mary-Love, and after Mary-Love's death Sister had done nothing to keep Miriam from pursuing that same aimless, self-indulgent way of life. Working at the mill, being compelled to deal with customers and subordinates, and maintaining a relationship with her father—a relationship that did have at least a casual intimacy—had smoothed some of Miriam's rougher edges. She was compelled to think of others, to figure out motives for behavior, determine prejudices, and try to understand nuances of behavior. Her churlishness now was a choice, not a deficiency of her basic personality.

Indicative of this new sensitivity in Miriam was the way that she now treated Sister Haskew. During the war, Sister, now in her early fifties, had become what everyone had always said she would turn out to be—a spinster. She forgot, as nearly as it was possible to forget, that she ever had had a husband. Early Haskew had been in California, Michigan, Greece, England, and France. He had sent Sister postcards from each of those places, and Sister—after always glancing at the postmarks—had torn them up, unread. She shuddered as she ripped the cards in two: "I don't even want to *think* about that man."

"Why don't you get a divorce?" asked Miriam one morning at breakfast after Ivey had brought in one of the cards. This one had a photograph of the Roman Coliseum on it.

"Nobody in this family has ever gotten a divorce," said Sister.

"You could be the first."

Sister looked at Miriam strangely. "What would I get a divorce *for?* Early's never *done* anything to me."

"Then why don't you ever want to see him again?"

"You shouldn't ask me that question."

"Why not?"

Sister paused. "Because I don't know the answer."

Miriam picked up the scraps of the postcard, and dropped them one by one onto her plate. She said, "The reason you married Early was to spite

Grandmama."

Sister nodded.

"But after Grandmama died, there was no reason to stay married to Early. Early chews tobacco."

"He made me feed his dogs out of a nipple-bottle. Twice a night, I had to get up and feed those puppies. It was like having six children all at once. He put a Coke machine on the front porch of our house." Sister blushed with the memory. "I came home one day and saw that, and I said, 'If Mama were to come up here and see this, I would have to lay down in the road and die of shame.'"

"And that's why, when Grandmama died, you stayed on here. You didn't stay to keep care of me, you stayed 'cause you didn't want to go back to Early."

"How long have you known this?"

"I just this minute figured it out," said Miriam with a little shrug.

"I loved you, darling, and I *did* want to take care of you."

"I know you did, Sister."

"You don't want me to go back to Early, do you? I know you could get along fine without me, and I know this house really and truly belongs to you, but I don't want to go back to Chattanooga or wherever it is that man is living now. Miriam, darling, sometimes I sit up in my room at night, and I think, 'What if Miriam gets married and she moves her husband in here, is she gone throw me out?' Would you do that, would you throw me out?"

"Sister, you're rich, don't you know that? Grandmama left all her money to you and Oscar. All I got was this house and the safety-deposit boxes. If I threw you out of here, you could go anywhere you wanted to. You could set up housekeeping in the main street of New Orleans if you wanted to. If you wanted to stay in Perdido, you could get the DeBordenave house from James and fix it all up any way you liked it."

"That's not answering my question."

Miriam grinned. "I'm not gone get married. I haven't got time. I'm working every minute of the day and half the night. And even if I did," she added in a lower voice, "I'd never throw you out."

"That's what I wanted to hear!"

"Are you satisfied?" said Miriam, rising from the table. "Where do you suppose Oscar is? It's getting late."

"Miriam, come hug me!"

“What for?”

“For being so sweet!”

“Oh, Sister, whoever called me sweet before?”

“Well, I never did—and nobody else did either, within *my* hearing. But we were all wrong—every one of us.”

Miriam went over and put her arms briefly about Sister’s neck. Sister reached up and squeezed Miriam’s clenched fists as hard as she could.

. . .

All James Caskey’s prayers and all Billy Bronze’s words in the ear of his commanding officer had not been able to keep Danjo Strickland from being transferred away from Eglin Air Base.

“This is going to kill me,” said James to his nephew when Danjo told him of the orders.

“It is not,” said Danjo. “By the time I get over there, wherever it is they’re sending me, the war is gone be over.”

“Who’s gone die first?” demanded James Caskey querulously. “You or me? Are you gone get shot before I die of grief? Or am I gone get laid out in my casket before you get mown down on the battlefield?”

“Neither one is gone happen,” said Danjo calmly. “That’s why I was trained in radio. They don’t put their radiomen at the front. Or at least most of ’em stay way behind the lines. Besides, look at Germany right now, where are their lines? We’re beating ’em way back, James.”

James rocked violently on the porch and wouldn’t look up at Danjo, as if somehow all this were his doing.

“Hey, look at me, James.”

James looked up but didn’t stop rocking.

“I don’t want to go,” said Danjo softly. “I don’t want to leave you. Don’t you think I’m gone miss you?”

“Don’t bother to write,” said James.

“Why not?”

“’Cause I’m gone be dead.”

. . .

Two days after Danjo was shipped out, Germany surrendered. James was certain that Danjo therefore was being sent to the continued, bloody fighting in the Pacific.

Billy heard two weeks later that Danjo was in Germany, billeted in a castle on a mountaintop east of Munich. His sole duty was to signal Allied

planes a safe path to a nearby landing field.

A letter confirming this arrived a few days later. Danjo complained of nothing but the boredom and the strict injunction against the fraternizing with the conquered citizenry. The castle had its own cook, its own farm, even its own vineyard. The graf and his two daughters lived in rooms below his. The graf was a nice old man who reminded Danjo of James—except, of course, the graf didn't speak English and didn't like Americans—and the two daughters were very pretty and very nice and made his bed for him every morning.

Billy heard this letter read aloud at the dinner table. He sighed and said, "Let him complain. When I think of the number of men I trained who're dead now..."

"He could fall off that mountain," said James. "That old graf could murder him in his bed!" James had somehow got it into his head that "graf" meant "cobbler," and he wondered how a shoemaker came into possession of a castle.

"Nothing's going to happen to Danjo," said Queenie sternly. "James, I don't want you to imagine one single thing more."

James was seventy-five. It had been his lifelong quirk to show his age only in fits and starts. He would go along for five, ten, or fifteen years with no perceptible alteration of appearance or demeanor. Then one single event would suddenly pour down those years upon his head in a single moment. Such had been the case when his wife Genevieve had died violently on the Atmore road; he had then been a well-preserved young man suddenly thrust into middle years. The death of his sister-in-law Mary-Love had swept the well-preserved middle-aged man into old age. This departure of Danjo to Europe pitched James Caskey from a sturdy old age into incipient senility.

James was alone and Queenie was alone, so Queenie gave up her house and moved in with James. She even laughed about the situation to Elinor: "When I came to Perdido twenty-something years ago, I thought to myself, 'I'll get a divorce from Carl and then I'll marry James Caskey. He's a rich man and his money will make me happy.' That seemed real simple. Now it's hard to even think of all the things that have happened over those years. But here I am, moving in with him, and it's *me* that's taking care of *him.* And you know what's real funny, Elinor?"

"What?"

“That I don’t even *think* about money anymore.” Queenie let out a little ironic chuckle.

Two or three times a week Queenie drove James out to Gavin Pond to visit their daughters. James loved the infant Tommy Lee and held him on his lap for as long as Tommy Lee would allow it. But James couldn’t always remember the boy’s name, and called him variously Danjo, Malcolm, and John Robert. James often seemed to have forgotten all about Danjo, and listened only vacantly to the letters that Queenie read to him. At the end of them, James would always say impatiently, “Queenie, let’s go out to the pond this afternoon. I need a little boy on my lap.”

“We were there yesterday, James,” Queenie would sometimes have to say.

“Yesterday?”

“That’s right. And we cain’t go again today, those girls would get tired of us and put a padlock on that gate.”

Sometimes at night Queenie would be awakened by the sound of James stumbling through the darkened house. He’d push open the door of her room and stand as Lazarus might have stood, bewildered at the mouth of the tomb. His wide-open eyes saw nothing.

“Who’s in here?” he’d call into the darkness. “Grace, is that you? Genevieve?”

“It’s me—Queenie. James, go back to bed.”

“Where is everybody? Why is the house empty?”

Chapter 57

The Flight

The death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April, 1945, made a greater impression on Perdido than had the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the other great events of World War II. Roosevelt, after all, had been talked of daily for more than a dozen years. All the church bells in town had rung out for half an hour on D-Day. They rang out twice that long to mourn the death of the president. The German surrender soon afterward made a smaller impression.

Frances and Billy Bronze had made no definite plans to be wed, but the death of Roosevelt and the end of fighting in Europe made everyone feel, justifiably or not, that the war was over. Discipline at Eglin was more relaxed than ever. Enlisted men wanted only to go to the beach and stretch out their time in Billy's classes until the day of the Japanese surrender, which surely could not be far off. On the screened porch upstairs one day after lunch, Billy Bronze said to Elinor, "Maybe Frances and I should think about July."

"Are you getting out of the service?" asked Elinor.

"I've already started on that. I've been in a long time and I think they'll let me go."

Elinor eyed her future son-in-law with humorous mistrust. "You haven't been changing your mind, have you?"

"About what, Mrs. Caskey?"

"About taking my little girl away from me. She's all I've got."

Billy laughed. That Elinor Caskey, head of her family, rich, always surrounded with relatives, sought after in the town and known even in Mobile and Pensacola, should declare that her younger daughter was all that she had, seemed ridiculous to Billy.

"It's true," said Elinor seriously. "If you were to take Frances away, it would kill me. And what's more, it would kill Frances, too."

"I don't believe that," said Billy. "But I'm not taking her away, so there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Elinor. "There's plenty of room in this house for all of us."

"Yes, ma'am," returned Billy. "I just hope you and Mr. Caskey are prepared to support a son-in-law for a while. My daddy's got all the money in the world, but I'm not going to see a crying dime of it before he dies. And it may be some time before I can even find a job."

"We're not worried," Elinor reassured him. "We'll let you know when to stop taking advantage of us."

. . .

Billy was released from the Air Corps during the first week in July. All his belongings had been moved into Oscar and Elinor's house. He and Frances were married late in the month in a simple ceremony in the sweltering heat of Elinor's living room. No one in Perdido could understand why the Caskeys, rich as they were, never went in for large church weddings, as anyone else in their position assuredly would have done. Elinor Caskey could certainly have afforded a splendid wedding for her daughter, but the whole ceremony and reception probably had cost her less than fifty dollars. Perhaps, Perdido considered, Frances was pregnant. The truth was that the Caskeys were only following their custom. Their weddings were always sudden, hasty, casual affairs. Not one of them would have felt comfortable seeing the bride in a church, with mounds of flowers and rows of bridesmaids. There was also the difficulty of Billy's father, who had refused to attend, to send congratulations, to speak to any member of the bride's family over the telephone, or even to contribute five dollars as a wedding gift. At the end of the ceremony, before Billy and Frances had even broken their first wedded embrace, Miriam flung aside her wilting bouquet and cried, "Good Lord! Come on upstairs, Sister, and help me get out of this damned dress. There's a pin been sticking in my side since two o'clock!"

Billy and Frances were pleased by the modestness of the wedding. It seemed more in keeping with the tenor of their quiet courtship than anything larger would have been. They honeymooned in New Orleans for a week, and returned directly to Perdido. Although Billy's possessions were stored in the front room, the couple slept in Frances's room next to the sleeping porch.

The Caskeys were satisfied with Frances's new husband. One day not long after the wedding, Elinor said to Sister and to Queenie, "Do you notice a little bit of difference between Mary-Love and me? Do you notice that my little girl got married, but is not leaving home? Do you see that her husband is perfectly content to live under my roof?"

Miriam, though she said nothing, was grateful to Billy for not seeking a job at the mill, where her carefully built-up power would have been threatened by the force of his authority as a man.

With money supplied her by her father, Grace Caskey was able to buy up approximately five thousand acres of farming land around and contiguous to Gavin Pond. Most of it had been fallow since the beginning of the Depression, and some of it was nearly subtropical forest, with alligator ponds and creeks that flowed so smoothly and quietly that they seemed not to flow at all. Grace didn't want yet to put this land to use, but like all other Caskeys, she felt better just *owning* it. Now she knew no one would invade her and Lucille's cherished privacy. Their remoteness was insured.

Grace lured Luvadia Sapp out to live at Gavin Pond with a promise of unlimited fishing rights. Luvadia brought with her her three-year-old illegitimate son Sammy, fathered by Roxie's forty-three-year-old son Escue. They lived in the kitchen for six weeks or so until Escue Welles built them a little house of their own, hidden in the cypress grove across the pond and next to the graveyard. Luvadia could see the epitaphs out her kitchen window. Escue decided not to return to Perdido, but to remain with Luvadia and Sammy. He gave up his job at the mill and was hired by Grace as her overseer. Escue knew less about farming than anyone Grace had ever met, but he was a hard worker and Luvadia loved him.

Grace had cleared out the pecan orchard the spring before, cutting out the oak and pine saplings that had destroyed the symmetry of the grid of massive trees. She had mown the grass short, and cleared out the stream that ran through it. With Lucille she had gone to Miami, Oklahoma, and bought seventy-five heifers. Even Lucille could tell the cows apart, and she kept careful records of their pedigrees, especially after the acquisition of Zato, their prize bull, worth every penny of the eleven thousand dollars that was paid for him. The animals had grazed contentedly among the pecan trees all summer long, but autumn had come now, and Grace was looking forward to the harvest of the nuts.

One morning late in September 1945, just before dawn, Grace climbed into her pickup truck and took off for Babylon. Luvadia and Escue sat together in the back of the vehicle. Grace drove into the colored section of town and started blowing her horn. Luvadia and Escue stood up on the bed of the truck and shouted, "Pecans! Pecans!"

Grace drove slowly. Teenage boys and girls flew off their front porches and out of their yards and leaped onto the back of the truck. In the houses, unemployed men were roused out of their sleep by their wives, shoved into their clothes, and pushed out the door toward the truck. Mothers climbed up with their babies wrapped in slings around their necks. Grace stopped occasionally for an old decrepit woman to be hoisted up with the rest. When the back of the truck could hold no more, Grace took off down the road toward Gavin Pond.

At the gate of the pecan orchard, each picker was given a croker sack to fill. Luvadia took all the children too young to work over to her house and set them on the floor with Sammy. The black workers fairly flew at the trees and began picking up all the nuts on the ground. Grace, armed with a large stick, patrolled for snakes and shooed away the curious cows. The two biggest black men went systematically down each row of the orchard, threw their arms about the trunk of each tree—the circumference of which always surpassed the reach of their arms—and shook it until the pecans showered down.

The pickers worked all morning, forever stooped, never looking up, sometimes singing hymns together, sometimes only humming to themselves, sometimes scolding the children or trading gossip. Lucille and Luvadia brought out innumerable plates of biscuits and cornbread, and one child did nothing but fill jugs of water at the stream that flowed through the orchard.

They stopped at eleven and went to Luvadia's house where they were all served ham and black-eyed peas and collard greens. Grace and Lucille themselves dished up and passed out plates. The pecan gatherers agreed, when they returned to their work that afternoon, that no farmers had ever been so kind to them. During the day the workers dragged their croker sacks—either filled or too heavy to work with anymore—up to the porch of the house. There they were weighed by Escue, and tallies kept beside the names of the pickers. At three o'clock Grace totaled the weights and paid out to the pickers at the rate of five cents a pound. Some earned as much as six or seven dollars. Afterward she drove them all back to Babylon. Many fell asleep immediately upon climbing onto the bed of the truck, despite the bumpiness of the ride through the forest. They all hopped out in the center of the colored section of town, and Grace promised that she would be back bright and early the following morning.

News got around that night in Babylon, and next morning Grace didn't even have to blow her horn. Colored people were waiting on their front porches in every direction, and she made only a single stop. The back of the truck was filled instantly. Luvadia and Escue even sat up front with Grace so that a few more could be crowded into the back. So many were disappointed that Grace promised to make a return trip that morning.

For two weeks the pickers came to Gavin Pond, and at the end of that time there was not a single pecan left on the ground or in the trees. Grace gave each of her pickers a two-dollar bonus for having been so thorough. The living room of the house was filled with croker sacks of pecans. With Escue's help Grace loaded the sacks into the truck and carried them to the pecan wholesaler in Jay and received twenty cents a pound. She saved a sack for herself, a second sack for Luvadia, and took four more to Perdido. Miriam requisitioned two of the sacks, divided the pecans into ten-pound lots, and mailed them to purchasing agents in the North.

Grace's seven-hundred-dollar profit was modest, and it wouldn't begin to pay back what she had spent on heifers or the purchase of land or the improvements she had been making on the property—but she was nonetheless proud of her work. She felt encouraged to go forward, and bought pigs and chickens. As soon as Tommy Lee was able to walk, he was given a small sack of grain and was taught by Sammy how to scatter food for the fowl.

The pecan harvest had a secondary effect, unforeseen by Grace and Lucille. It was their means of introduction to Babylon. Their existence was known throughout the black community, and eventually it came to be known in the white community as well. Grace realized that there was no longer any reason for keeping their existence secret, and began to trade at the grain and feed stores. A female farmer was not unknown in these parts, for there had been a tradition, following each of the wars, for widows to take over the running of the farms, and Grace commanded respect on several counts: her success with the pecan harvest, her purchase of so much land with ready cash, and her determined demeanor. Southerners are an easygoing race when it comes to aberrations of conduct. They will react with anger if something out of the ordinary is presented as a possible future occurrence; but if an unusual circumstance is discovered to be an established fact, they will usually accept it without rancor or judgment as part of the normal order of things. To have informed the men who hung

about the seed and feed stores that two women had bought Gavin Pond and were turning it into the biggest farm in the county would have brought out calls to repeal the voting rights amendment; but when confronted with Grace, the men were perfectly willing to accept her, her cousin Lucille, and Lucille's little boy.

The two women and the boy usually all drove into town together on Saturday, Grace at the wheel with Lucille beside her bouncing up and down on the seat with Tommy Lee on her lap. Luvadia, Escue, and Sammy were in the back. Everybody passing them on the road knew who they were and raised a single finger above the steering wheel in silent greeting. Grace and Escue shopped all Saturday afternoon, filling the back of the truck with grain and supplies. Luvadia and Sammy went to the grocery store and bought food for the coming week, and Lucille sat with Tommy Lee at the counter in the drugstore and gossiped. Grace and Lucille reflected on how different their life was here on the farm south of Babylon from what it had been in Perdido. The expectations of their youth had not been filled. Why on earth, Grace wondered, had she taught school when she was so much happier with her cows and pigs and chickens? How, thought Lucille, could she ever have flirted with those terrible servicemen when Grace had been so nearby?

Sometimes, during the week, Lucille left Tommy Lee with Luvadia, and she and Grace went into Babylon to eat a catfish supper and go to the picture show. This soon became a cherished habit with the cousins on Wednesday night, when the bill changed at the theater. People sitting on the front porches would point as the truck rattled by, and say, "There's Grace and Lucille, on their way to the picture show. They probably don't even know what's playing."

. . .

Winter came to Gavin Pond. A few leaves turned brown, but the mild weather couldn't persuade them to drop off. Late summer flowers continued to bloom, determinedly ignoring the calendar. Sometimes Lucille and Grace put sweaters on when they went into town on Wednesday nights.

The second Wednesday in January 1946 was a cool evening. Leaving Tommy Lee in the charge of Luvadia, Grace and Lucille put on their sweaters, climbed into the truck, and drove into Babylon. They ate supper at the catfish place on the Ponce de Leon Road, where they were known to everyone, and where their usual meal was served without their ordering.

Afterward, at the picture show, they saw a double bill of *Dillinger* and *Dangerous Partners.* They were out of the theater by eleven o'clock. The night was now even colder with bright stars. The waning moon would not rise till after midnight.

The Babylon post office closed its windows at five o'clock, but the front door was left open, allowing access to the boxes. Grace pulled up in front of the tiny brick building, went in the front door, walked over to the wall that the boxes were on, and twirled the combination. She pulled out a small sheaf of letters, slammed the little door shut, and returned to the truck.

"What did we get?" asked Lucille excitedly.

"Cattle auction ads for me, seed catalog for you, and a letter from Danjo."

"Oh, read it here!" Lucille switched on the light in the cab of the truck. After glancing at the German Occupation stamps on the envelope, Grace tore open the envelope and read:

Dear Grace,

I'm writing to you because I don't want to write directly to James because he might get upset. The reason he might get upset is that I have just gotten myself married. That is wonderful and I know he'll be happy for me. The problem is she's German and I can't get her out of the country yet. I wasn't even supposed to meet her, regulations against fraternization with the enemy and all that, but I did, and we fell in love. She is the graf's daughter who owns this castle, his oldest daughter. The graf died last month so we got married. Her name is Fredericka von Hoeringmeister. I call her Fred, so now she is Fred Strickland. She doesn't have any money and it takes a lot of money to keep up a castle, so she will probably let her sister have it and we will come back to Alabama. That is, as soon as I can arrange to get her out. She wasn't a Nazi or anything. The graf wasn't either. But he still didn't like Americans, and that's why Fred and I waited until he was dead. Does Oscar know anybody in Congress? Congress could help me get Fred back to Alabama. I don't know what to do about James. Should I write to him? Will you talk to him? Fred doesn't mind living with him when we come back, if he doesn't mind having a German in

the house. Fred made my bed every morning, that's how I met her. There were about fifteen of us occupying the castle. I'll be out of the Air Corps in six months, then I'll try to come back. But I won't come back unless I can bring Fred with me. I'm going to leave all this up to you, Grace. You tell everybody. I can't be writing ten letters all saying the same thing.

Sincerely yours,
Danjo
P.S. Fred says "hi."

This letter was surprising, and the object of discussion between Grace and Lucille all the way back to Gavin Pond. Grace dreaded telling her father not only that his precious boy was married, but that because of that marriage, he might be delayed in his long-awaited return to Perdido.

"Cain't help it, though," argued Lucille. "James's got to find out. We cain't keep this thing secret from the whole family. And if one of them finds out, it's bound to get back to James, so you might as well tell him straight off. He'll get over it, especially if Danjo says he's coming back, and he and Fred will stay in the house with James. I wonder what she's like. I hope he's taught her to speak English."

"Well," said Grace, turning off the dark road into the even darker forest, "I'm not gone make any decisions in the middle of the night. Let's us decide in the morning."

Grace drove slowly. The truck jolted over the hard ground. Grace leaned over the steering wheel and peered into the night. Lucille bounced up and down and held her pocketbook over her head to keep from getting hurt when she bounced against the roof of the cab.

When they reached the gate to the farm, Lucille got out and pushed it open. Grace drove the truck through, and Lucille jumped on the running board for the short quarter mile to the house.

No lights shone inside the house. "Luvadia must have fallen asleep again," said Lucille, shaking her head as she jumped down from the running board.

Grace turned off the ignition, and cried, "No! Listen!"

From inside the house—through the open window of their own bedroom—they heard a faint, masculine voice, singing.

"Who in the world—" began Lucille.

“It’s Daddy,” whispered Grace in wonder. She opened the door of the truck quietly, and got out.

“What in the world is James doing out here this time of night?” said Lucille. “And where is his car?”

Grace shook her head. She shivered. The evening was suddenly very cold.

“What’s he doing up there?” said Lucille, and came around the truck, taking hold of Grace’s hand. They stared up at the darkened bedroom window.

“He’s singing to Tommy Lee,” said Grace quietly. “Shhh! Lord! I had forgot that song, he used to sing it to me every night. It’s a lullaby.”

James Caskey’s voice, tremulous and faint, floated out of the window.

“Fly, ladybird, fly
Your daddy’s hanging high
Your mama’s shut in Moscow town
Moscow town is burning down
Fly, ladybird, fly”

At the end of the song, his voice drifted off. All the world seemed silent. In the darkness Lucille and Grace looked at each other, and then they quietly went into the house through the kitchen. They found Luvadia sitting at the table, with her head on her crossed arms, sleeping.

Grace gently shook her awake.

“Miss Grace,” said Luvadia groggily, even before she had opened her eyes.

“When did Daddy get out here?” Grace asked.

“Ma’am?”

“Daddy?” Grace repeated. “When did Daddy get here?”

“Ma’am? Mr. James not here...”

Lucille was already at the bottom of the stairs with her foot on the lowest step.

Grace hurried after her. “No,” she cried, “don’t go up!”

“Tommy Lee...” said Lucille in explanation, and began to mount the stairs to the darkened bedroom.

Grace pushed past Lucille and hurried to the second floor. She flung open the door of the bedroom. A violent gust of wind blew through the

room, and the curtains were flung with a *whoosh* out into the night air.

Grace ran to the bassinet, but even in the darkness she knew that Tommy Lee was no longer there.

She ran to the window, threw her head out, and shouted, “Daddy! Bring him back!”

The light came on in the room behind her.

Lucille said, “Grace! What in the world—”

Grace turned around with agony in her face.

Tommy Lee lay sleeping on the bed, cradled between two pillows. Beside the sleeping infant was a long indentation in the soft mattress, outlining a human form.

Wonderingly, Lucille ran her hand over that depression in the chenille spread. “It’s still warm,” she said.

Downstairs, the telephone rang. Grace snatched Tommy Lee up from the bed and cradled him in her arms. “You go get it,” said Grace.

Glancing back at the tears in Grace’s eyes, Lucille ran down the stairs.

It was Queenie calling, to say that James had had a heart attack and was dead. “I came in just now,” said Queenie, in a wandering, distracted voice, “and I found him lying right across the living room door. If I hadn’t turned on the light first, I would have tripped right over him.”

V: The Fortune

Chapter 58

Assessment

All the Caskeys sincerely mourned the death of James Caskey. Though the man had been old and frail, no one had imagined that he would ever die. He had been the oldest of the clan, though never in any sense its leader. Perhaps if he had been in a more exalted position, everyone would have wondered, *Who'll take over when James is gone?* But in fact, with his death there was no reshuffling of state and station, only an acknowledgement of the emptiness he had left behind.

Queenie was the one who felt most alone, and everyone treated her as if she had been a widow rather than James's sister-in-law. Her son Danjo was now married, but stuck in Germany with his German wife, unable to return because of difficulties with immigration—or so he wrote to his mother. Queenie's daughter Lucille had turned into the perfect "farm wife" and had no use for a life in town with her mother. Her elder boy Malcolm, whom she hadn't seen since he ran away in 1938, she presumed to be dead.

The often volatile Lucille, in a sympathetic frame of mind, said, "Ma, come out to the Pond and live with Grace and Tommy Lee and me." Queenie merely shook her head, and wiped away a tear.

Sister said, "Queenie, come next door and put up in Mary-Love's old room. I need me some company with Miriam over at the mill all day." Queenie silently declined.

Elinor said, "You know you're welcome with us."

Queenie turned down all offers, and at last ventured a diffident request: "Would it be all right if I just stayed on here? And took care of all James's old stuff? He loved this house so much!"

After a minimum of discussion, the family decided that it was the perfect solution, and Queenie's old house a few blocks away, which for a couple of years had been vacant most of the time, was sold.

James's daughter Grace had assumed that her father would leave the whole of his fortune to her—that was the way of the Caskeys—and she had been trying to figure out how best to distribute portions of that wealth to those who had been dear to her father. She was relieved at the reading of the will to discover that this would not be necessary. Except for some small

bequests to his cook Roxie and to the Methodist Church of Perdido, James's entire fortune was divided equally among Queenie, Danjo, and Grace.

The trouble was, no one knew the extent of James's fortune. Yet this lack of knowledge proved to be the solution to another Caskey problem. Ever since Billy Bronze and Frances Caskey had got married, Billy had had a great deal of time on his hands, particularly after he was released from the Air Corps. He volunteered his services to the local Veterans Administration office and four evenings a week taught radio and accounting to ex-servicemen who drifted back to Perdido. But most of the time Billy felt useless, left alone all day with the women while his father-in-law Oscar and his sister-in-law Miriam went off to the bustling mill. He had declined an offer to work at the mill because he knew nothing of the lumber business. He understood that Oscar had made the job proposal only out of charity. Miriam, speaking with greater candor, had said: "We'll be glad to put you on the payroll as long as you promise not to go out and get in everybody's way." Billy wanted not only to work, but to work at something useful.

Frances, however, liked having her husband at home all day. She enjoyed the fact that he could drive her to Pensacola for an afternoon movie or down to Mobile for some shopping. But she saw also that he was restless. One morning in the winter of 1946, as Frances and Billy lay in bed together, Frances turned to her husband and said, "Maybe Miriam could find you a place in the office at the mill. I know you don't know anything about trees, and you don't like working out-of-doors, but you're fine with a pencil and an adding machine."

"No, no," protested Billy, "don't do that! Please don't say anything to Miriam!"

"Why not?" asked Frances, puzzled.

"Just think for a minute," said Billy. "Just think how hard Miriam works at that mill."

"She runs it!" said Miriam's sister proudly.

"That's just it," nodded Billy. "Now what do you think would happen if I suddenly started to show up there every day?"

"You'd help her run it better."

Billy shook his head. "No, no. Don't forget that I'm a Caskey now. So if I went to work in that office, people would start coming to me because I'm older—and because I'm a man. Pretty soon I'd have more power than Miriam, not because I was any better than her at it, but just because I was a

man. Miriam knows that, and she doesn't want me there. And I don't blame her for one minute."

"You think that's what would happen?"

"I know it," returned Billy definitely. "I am *not* going to interfere with your sister. She has worked long and hard. *But,"* said Billy, taking Frances in his arms, and pressing her head against his bare chest, "maybe what I could do..."

"What?"

"I could keep books. That's what I do best."

"But you just said that you didn't want to interfere—"

"I'm not talking about the mill," said Billy, "I'm talking about keeping books for the family, being a kind of personal accountant for everybody."

"You think you could do that? Daddy says that everything's so confused."

"I could do it without giving it a second thought. I inherited that from my father. Keeping books is how he made all his money. He was so good at it. At night he'd go down to his office and look through the books for ten minutes. Next day he'd go out and make five thousand dollars. I never saw anything like it."

Frances was so excited by the idea that she pulled her husband out of bed and hurried him down to the breakfast room. She then insisted that he explain his proposal to Elinor and Oscar.

"Let me look things over," Billy said. "We ought to be able to figure out just what everybody's got. It wouldn't be a bad thing to find out what kind of shape you're all in."

"Not a bad idea," said Oscar, "but I don't know where to tell you to begin, everything's so mixed up. See, we did pretty badly in the first years of the Depression and pretty well during the war. Then everybody was dying for a while, and there were wills to contend with, and who left what to who, and people borrowing from each other, and I don't know what all else. The way it works now is if somebody needs some money they go to Miriam, and Miriam writes a check."

"It shouldn't be that way," said Billy. "That's nothing against Miriam, but everybody should know exactly what they've got. That way nobody's going to feel cheated, and—believe me—you'll all make more money."

Elinor appeared to like this idea, and asked: "What do you need?"

“I need to see whatever you’ve got—papers, wills, deeds, bank statements, certificates, every bit of paper any of you can lay your hands on. First I’ll have to see what belongs to each of you personally and what belongs to the mill. If it belongs to the mill, then I’ll pass it along to Miriam and let *her* deal with it. This’ll help her get things straightened out, too. After I know what everybody’s got, I’ll be able to see what we can do to make it a lot more.” Billy shrugged and laughed apologetically. “I’m not greedy, you know. It’s just that all this is in my blood. I see a balance sheet and all I can think is, how do I make those totals bigger?”

“When do you want to start?” asked Elinor.

“As soon as possible. But don’t you think you’d better speak to the others first?”

“Why?” asked Elinor, certain of her position in the Caskey family. “They’re going to say yes.”

So Billy went right to work on getting the monetary affairs of the Caskey family in order. Elinor rented him a little office downtown and bought him a desk and file cabinets. He employed Frances as a secretary, not because she was efficient, but rather because she so much delighted to be in his company, even when he was silent and absorbed in his work. One by one the Caskeys came to Billy with all the documents they could find and told him everything they could remember about the family’s financial dealings for as far back as they could go. Billy took notes and asked questions.

Miriam and Billy worked together. Before the real net worth of the family could be determined, all the transactions that pertained directly to the mill had to be separated from personal business. Miriam was glad to be of help in this for it would ultimately serve to clarify her own work. While her sister and husband were closeted in his office, Frances would wander about the outer room, looking at magazines and staring out the window at the kudzu-covered levee.

By April, Billy had got the family finances straightened out, and after dinner one Sunday afternoon the Caskeys all gathered on Elinor’s screened porch. Even Grace, Lucille, and Tommy Lee had come in from Gavin Pond Farm for the day.

Elinor made only a brief introduction: “Billy has been kind enough to agree to take care of us from now on. I want everybody to listen to him and do exactly what he says.”

At this, Billy stood, made a self-deprecating nod, and spoke: “Now, I don’t want anybody to think that I have jumped into all this and am trying to take over, because that’s not it at all. I’m just a son-in-law accountant, and what I’ve tried to do is get this family’s money business straight—”

“Probably for the first time ever,” interjected Sister.

“I looked over all the papers you brought me, and I tried to get everything in order. I’m taking care of everything so that nobody but me has to think about it. You have all been very patient, not getting upset because you thought maybe I was prying into your private affairs—even Grace brought me her books on Gavin Pond Farm, and I think I’ll be able to help her build up her herd out there. If y’all have any questions from now on come to me with them, because I think I know about what’s what.”

“You are doing so much!” cried Sister.

“You may think it’s a lot,” said Billy, “but it’s not. Sister, that’s the trouble. You really don’t have any idea how much money you have. You want to go to New Orleans, you go to Miriam and you get two hundred and fifty dollars in cash, and that’s what you call bookkeeping. I’m here today to tell you that you’ve all got entirely too much money to treat it like that.”

Something in Billy’s tone and manner reminded the Caskeys of the Methodist preacher’s sermon that morning. Billy was pointing out the errors of their financial ways, and exhorting them to tread paths of greater fiscal responsibility.

“How much *have* we got?” asked Oscar.

“Well,” said Billy, “of course the greatest portion of the family wealth is tied up in the mill and the plants. So Miriam and I have been working closely to see if we couldn’t determine exactly how much all that is worth.” He turned to Miriam, who stood up with some papers in her hand.

“I’m not gone go into details, ’cause it’s not necessary,” Miriam said with characteristic bluntness. “Most of you wouldn’t understand anyway. There are two points. First point: James had a half-interest in everything. Sister and Oscar have a quarter-interest each. That is to say, all the real money is divided up between Sister, Oscar, and James’s estate. That’s not a complaint on my part, that’s just stating the case. Second point: The mill and the Caskey lands together are worth approximately twenty-three million dollars.” Miriam again took her seat.

“Good Lord!” cried Queenie.

No one else spoke—no one had had any idea that the value was so great. None of the Caskeys had ever considered attaching a number in dollars to the operation.

"We just wanted to give you an idea of the size," said Miriam. "See what I mean? Everybody was surprised. Oscar," she said, turning to her father with a rare smile, "even you didn't expect it to be so much, did you?"

"I sure didn't!"

"Your private fortunes are much smaller," said Billy. "For many years most of the personal profits have been reinvested, and not always in the strictest manner."

Oscar blushed. "Billy, let me say—"

"Nobody's blaming you, Oscar," said Sister. "You're the one who built the mill up, and if twenty-three million dollars is not enough to keep us all off the streets, then we all might as well lay down right now and give up the ghost."

"No," said Billy, "it's not so much that things were unfair, they were just confused. Money was borrowed and never paid back. Money that should have gone to Sister was used to buy new machinery, and so forth. Nobody's accusing anybody of anything, and the fact is—and you all know it—that the mill could very well have folded up without Oscar doing what he did. All I've been trying to do is separate things out again, so you all know where you stand. That's what I've done. Oscar Caskey is worth, in personal holdings and entitlements exclusive of the mill, approximately one million one hundred thousand dollars."

Oscar whistled, and Elinor's smile was well satisfied.

"Sister Haskew is worth approximately one million three hundred thousand dollars."

"Y'all," cried Sister, staring around the room with an astonished eye, "I'm gone buy me a new car *tomorrow!"*

"James Caskey," said Billy, "was worth approximately two million seven hundred thousand dollars, exclusive of his half-interest in the mill. And that fortune, as you know, will be divided three ways—equally—when the will is probated."

"Lord," cried Queenie, sitting on the glider with her grandchild in her lap, "James has gone and made me rich as Croesus."

"Now," continued Billy Bronze, "there is no reason why this family can't be a whole lot richer. You've got money now, and once you've got

money, it's the easiest thing in the world to make more."

"What for?" asked Grace. "Who needs millions and millions of dollars? Why do we need any more money than we've already got?"

Miriam turned to her cousin with a sour face. "So you can run out and buy your four hundred old heifers, that's why."

"I don't want four hundred," said Grace, unperturbed. "My pasture's not that big. I could use about eighty—unless I cleared more land..."

"I'm not against making more money," said Oscar. "I think we should, in fact. I just don't know how to go about it. Billy, do you?"

"Yes," said Billy. "I think I do."

Miriam nodded. "Billy knows what he's talking about. If it were my decision, everybody in this room would sign over power of attorney to Billy and let him do what he wants."

"You don't have to do that," said Billy, a bit nervously. "All I would like to do is make recommendations, and if you like them, then you can go through with them. That's all. Here's what I'm suggesting: Miriam and I will work together. Miriam will take care of the mill, like she's been doing —just fine—all along. And I'll take care of your personal money. If you need some cash you don't go to Miriam anymore, you come to me instead."

"It sure would save *me* some bother," said Miriam, "not to have to write those damned checks all the time."

. . .

The Caskeys all acquiesced to Billy's proposal, and after that Sunday afternoon on the screened porch, they never saw themselves in the same light again. They possessed far more money than any of them had suspected. Elinor was proud, as if she considered that her advice and support of Oscar during the hard years had made the fortunes possible. Sister was elated, for how could her husband touch her when so much money would have kept at bay someone far more dangerous and insistent than Early Haskew? Grace and Lucille were lost in dreams of pastures and herds and newly cleared land. The possibilities for the family seemed endless, but at the same time things seemed a bit vague. For the next few days, they looked about feverishly for things to spend money on. Sister bought a new car for herself, and another for Miriam. What's more, she bought Billy Bronze one, too. In her new car Sister drove Roxie, Ivey, Zaddie, and Luvadia down to Pensacola and turned them loose in one of the

nicest dress shops in town, saying, “We’re not leaving this place until I have squandered five hundred dollars, and I mean it.”

On the whole, however, the Caskeys didn’t spend much more than they had before. They simply became conscious of their wealth. Billy was very busy, in his office downtown. He took over the running of Queenie’s household, so that she would not be embarrassed for funds while James’s will was still in probate. He conferred with Grace about the building up of Gavin Pond Farm. Sister came twice a week to find out how quickly and by how much her net worth was increasing. Oscar and Miriam visited him frequently, and Billy was often closeted in deep financial discussions, particularly with his sister-in-law. Frances was enormously proud of what her husband had done—and was doing—for the family. The Caskeys urged Billy to accept a salary for his work, and he did so without demur.

This son-in-law had ushered the Caskeys into an entirely new stage of their history.

Chapter 59

What Billy Did

During the months when the war was obviously winding down, the Caskeys changed gears. Miriam and her father decided that they should begin a reconversion to their prewar type of operation as soon as possible. Soon the military would be building no more bases, no more barracks. The Caskey mill, in the latter months of 1945, had still been filling back orders, but few new ones were coming in. Miriam had realized, from what she saw in Perdido, that things would be different after the war. Returning veterans would want new housing, for instance. Factories would have to be rebuilt or remodeled to permit new industries and establish employment for these former soldiers. The country would have to learn to deal with prosperity as it had learned to deal with impoverishment. By the beginning of 1946, the Caskey mill was running at full tilt, in all its divisions, even when there weren't orders for the lumber, poles, sashes, and boxes. Oscar had his carpenters throw up new warehouses on the property that had once been the Turk mill. When the civilian orders began to come in, as Miriam was convinced they would, the Caskeys would be ready.

When Billy Bronze took over the personal finances of the Caskeys, he took a portion of their fortunes and began to invest it in stocks that he and Miriam considered would soon rise considerably. To diversify, he bought apartment houses in Mobile for Sister, and Gulf-front property on Santa Rosa Island for Oscar, and poured Queenie and Grace's money into the development of Gavin Pond Farm. Danjo knew from his mother of James's death, and he learned from Billy of his substantial inheritance. The young man asked Billy to invest the money in America, and send him only the income. To Billy Danjo wrote: "Really the only reason I was going to come back to Perdido at all was because I knew James was so lonesome. Now that he's dead, I'm going to stay over here. Fred doesn't want to leave, and I don't mind staying. Come see us in our castle." Billy went along with Danjo's cover story to his mother that his not returning was a matter of problems with immigration.

The general comment among the Caskeys was that they didn't know what they had ever done without Billy.

Late in 1946, when Frances had been married to Billy for somewhat more than a year, she discovered that she was pregnant. Or, rather, Elinor found it out through a careful series of questions regarding her daughter's times and seasons. The diagnosis was confirmed by Leo Benquith. The doctor was an old man now and had greatly curtailed his practice. He tended to the Caskeys and a few other families, but most of his patients had passed to two young new doctors in town.

"Billy will be so happy," said Elinor as she drove her daughter home from the doctor's office.

Frances was silent.

"Aren't *you* happy, darling?"

"I don't know, Mama. Should I be?"

"Of course," Elinor replied with a bland smile. "Every young married woman wants to have children."

"Not if the children are going to be deformed," returned Frances quietly.

Elinor shot a glance at her daughter, but said nothing until they had drawn up in front of the house. Frances started to get out of the automobile, but Elinor caught her by the arm and said fiercely, *"Deformed?* Is that what you think? Is *that* what you call yourself? Is that what you call *me?"*

"Mama—"

"Is Zaddie Sapp deformed because she was born with black skin?"

"Of course not—"

"Are Grace and Lucille deformed because they have given up men and live out at Gavin Pond Farm together?"

"No, Mama, that's not—"

"That's how they were *born*, darling! Zaddie was born with black skin and Grace Caskey was born to dote on girls, and just because they're different, do you think Creola Sapp should have said, 'I'm not going to give birth to this child'? Do you think Genevieve and James should have said, 'We don't want a little baby if she's not going to grow up to be just like everybody else in this town'?"

At first Frances didn't answer, knowing her mother would interrupt her again. But Elinor was silent, looking straight ahead, her hands convulsively grasping the steering wheel.

"Mama," said Frances softly, "I wasn't thinking of *me*, I was thinking of the baby. I was thinking, 'What if the *baby's* not happy?' That's all. I'd

love it, I know I would."

"You said 'deformed,'" said Elinor.

"I guess that's not what I meant. I meant…*different*. I meant, is the baby going to be like you and me?"

Elinor glanced at her daughter once again, and now the glance was softer. "Are you that unhappy?"

"No!" cried Frances, rocking forward. "Mama, I'm not unhappy! How could I be unhappy, being married to Billy and still being able to live with you and Daddy? There's not a single thing wrong with my life. Mama, we didn't even lose anybody in the war! And so many people did."

"All right then," said Elinor. "Let's say you had a baby that was just like you, just like me—it would be different. And that's all. But Zaddie is different, Zaddie is black. Grace is different, Grace is never going to get married and have children of her own. But they're happy. And you're happy. Why do you think your own baby couldn't grow up happy, too?"

Frances thought about this for a moment. "I guess it could," she concluded. "I guess what I really wanted to know was, *is* the baby gone be like us, Mama?"

"There's no way of telling until it's born," said Elinor slowly. "Then we'll know." Elinor reached down and began to open the door of the car.

"Wait," said Frances, impulsively placing a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Mama," she whispered, "I was just worried…I was just thinking of the baby. I didn't mean…"

"I know you didn't, darling."

When they got inside the house, Billy said, "Why'd you sit out there in the car so long? Y'all must have been freezing!"

Frances smiled. "We were just talking over the good news."

"What good news?"

"I'm gone have a baby," Frances announced.

Billy's surprise and happiness were evidenced in a grin that looked as if it might split his face, and a string of scarcely articulate protestations that this couldn't be true. Frances assured him that it was.

"Are you sure you're gone want a little baby who does nothing but cry all the time?" Frances asked.

"Our little baby can cry all she wants, so far as I'm concerned. When is it due?"

"July," put in Elinor quickly.

“Are you going to take care of Frances?” Billy asked his mother-in-law.

Elinor nodded. Billy always said the right thing. “Zaddie and I are. We’re going to make sure that baby’s healthy.”

“Mama,” said Frances, with a little uneasiness in her voice, “I’ll be fine. Dr. Benquith can—”

“Zaddie and I will take care of you,” said Elinor firmly and without looking at her daughter. “Not Leo. I nursed Frances through her arthritis—”

“You *did* cure me,” Frances admitted.

“—and I am going to see you through this, too.”

“Do you think there might be complications?” asked Billy.

“I think,” said Elinor, “that starting tomorrow, I am going to bathe Frances just the way I used to when she was so sick.”

“In Perdido water?” asked Frances in a low voice.

. . .

Thereafter, as if she were a little girl again, Frances Bronze sat in the bathtub for one hour each day while her mother knelt on the floor and sponged Perdido water all over her body. While Frances never really looked forward to this ablution, she did not, after the first few times, dread it either. She actually seemed never even to think of it or remember it, until Elinor would seek her out, and say softly, “Time to go upstairs, Frances.” Then that unvarying phrase would act as a trigger in Frances’s mind; when she heard it spoken, she seemed to forget everything else. She would drop whatever she was doing, and march upstairs. Her clothing seemed to fall off her, and she would step into the bathtub. With that muddy red water being rubbed into her skin, and the odor of the river rising up around her, Frances would think there was no pleasure equal to it. After one brief stab at sending her mother away, Frances gave herself up to the intense pleasure. At the last moment, before she forgot everything else, Frances would ask herself, *Is there a transformation now?* or *There is a transformation now, but how complete is it?*, and would vow to question her mother afterward. But afterward—always more than an hour later by the clock, though she could scarcely believe the time had passed so quickly—Frances no longer recalled those questions. She remembered, in fact, only two things: her mother locking the door of the bathroom to make sure there would be no intrusion, and then standing out of the tub, with the sensation of the muddy red water flowing off her body and back into the bath. But the hour between that click

of the turning key and the feel of the muddy water pouring off her was lost to Frances, and she had no more memory of it than she had of the three years she had lain in bed with her illness years before.

Billy sometimes complained of the smell of the river in his wife's hair and upon her skin. Frances, acquiescent to her husband in all else, said only, "You'll get used to it."

. . .

To everyone else in the family, Frances's pregnancy was another undeniable instance of the forthrightness of Billy Bronze. When he set his mind to something, he walked right in at the door and did it. When he had got it into his head to become part of the Caskey family, he had picked out a marriageable daughter, wooed her, won her, married her, and got her pregnant in order to produce more Caskeys. The family's admiration for Billy Bronze was unbounded, and much faith was put in his judgments and opinions.

Grace, for instance, was constantly seeking his approval and advice on her plans for the development of Gavin Pond Farm. With the money that had come to her from her father, Grace was anxious to buy more land. Most everyone in the family was against this, saying that Grace already owned more property than she knew what to do with over there on the other side of the Perdido River in Florida, that most of what she contemplated buying—south of her current holdings—was merely swampland, good neither as farmland or as usable forest. Yet Grace found two unexpected champions—Billy and Elinor. Billy said, "If you have money you're not using, and aren't likely to need, then go ahead and buy that land. You'll never lose."

Elinor said, "I have a feeling about that swampland."

"You've never even seen it!" cried Oscar.

"How do you know that?" Elinor returned, arching an eyebrow at her husband. Oscar said no more.

With an irrational acquisitiveness worthy of the deceased Mary-Love, Grace Caskey bought up more than sixteen thousand acres of seemingly worthless swampland directly south of Gavin Pond Farm. Though claimed over the decades by the Creek Indians, the Spanish, the French, the English, and the Americans successively, this desolate expanse of marsh and pool and cypress had never been lived on, hunted on, or even completely scouted. This land, added to Gavin Pond Farm, made Grace's holdings contiguous to the fifty thousand acres of timber owned by Oscar in that

westernmost county of Florida. Outside the federal government, the Caskeys had become the largest landowners in the Florida panhandle.

Queenie, visiting her daughter and grandson at the farm, shook her head at Grace and said, “I don’t understand it at all. Why *did* you buy all that land—if that’s what you can call it.”

“Ma,” protested Lucille, “Grace didn’t want us to be hemmed in.”

“Hemmed in!” cried Queenie, bouncing little Tommy Lee violently on her knee in her agitation. “There’s not anybody living within five miles of this place. You could scream your head off for years and wouldn’t anybody come! And who in his right mind would try to do anything with that old swamp? Y’all are not even gone have poachers!”

“Queenie,” said Grace calmly, “Tommy Lee has just gotten all his teeth in. Are you trying to shake them loose?”

. . .

Shortly after this, Sister received a letter from Early Haskew. She had not seen her husband since Christmas of 1943. The note read:

Dear Sister,

I am in Kitzen, Germany, working on some bridges for the Allies. I heard Queenys boy was living over here and went to see him. His wife is real sweet I guess. They live in a big castle that belonged to her daddy and it is too big for them. Castles can be real cold and cold in Europe is not what cold is in Perdido. I should be through in March and then I am coming home. Look for me around the middle of April I guess. Ask Ivey if her Mama will give us some puppies. It sure is hard living without a dog. How is Grip?

Love,

Your husband Early

“Grip is dead!” Sister wailed to Ivey, as she staggered through the dining room and into the kitchen. “Grip was chasing a car and got run over. What am I gone do?” Sister’s distress was not for her dead bird dog, but rather for herself. There was no longer any pretense on Sister’s part that she missed Early Haskew or that she wanted to renew her married life.

“Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!” Sister cried, flinging herself in through the front door of Elinor’s house with the crumpled letter in her hand. “Why in

the world did so many people die in the war, and Early's coming back alive?"

"Early wasn't in the fighting," said Elinor, coming out into the hallway with a dinner napkin still in her hand.

She led Sister back into the dining room. Sister threw herself into Elinor's vacated chair at the head of the table and pushed away Elinor's plate as if it had been her own and she had lost all her appetite. Elinor went into the kitchen and brought out a glass of iced tea. Sister was now sprawled in the chair, her head down on her breast. "I don't want *anything!"* cried Sister.

No one said anything.

Sister suddenly looked up; fevered hope was in her eyes. "Billy!" she cried. "Billy Bronze! You tell me what to do! You tell me how to keep Early Haskew out of Perdido!"

But in this instance Billy had no advice; he could think of no solution, could provide no help.

The weeks passed. April arrived, and every day brought Sister closer to the time of her husband's dreaded reappearance.

Chapter 60

Ivey's Blue Bottle

Waking at dawn after yet another restless night some time during the first week in April 1947, Sister suddenly had an inspiration. It was Ivey Sapp who had been responsible for her marriage to Early in the first place, providing the spell that had captured him. Maybe Ivey could now do something about getting him out of Sister's life. Sister crept downstairs, just as Ivey and Bray were coming in the back door from Baptist Bottom.

"Go away, Bray," said Sister. "I got to speak to Ivey in private."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bray, turning around and going back out the door.

Ivey, not in the least put off by Sister's urgency in the dim early morning light, unpinned her hat, placed it atop the bread box, and began to slip into her apron. "What you got to say, Miz Caskey?"

"Protect me," whispered Sister. "Please."

"From what?" said Ivey. Sister and Miriam had bought Ivey an electric range, but Ivey said biscuits didn't cook right in an electric oven, so every morning she still fired up the wood stove in the corner of the kitchen. She now set about this task. Sister remembered the skewered chicken heart she had once thrown into that very blaze.

"From Early."

"Early your husband, Miz Caskey."

"I don't want him to be, Ivey."

Ivey shook her head in a combination of sorrow, disapproval, and confirmation, as if to say, *Isn't that something!*

"Help me," whispered Sister.

"I think a white lady ought to make up her mind what she wants," remarked Ivey.

"Ivey," cried Sister. "I wanted Early twenty-five years ago! Mama was still alive. Everything was different. I don't want him now. I don't want to go away with him. I want to stay here with you and Miriam, that's what I want."

Ivey shook her head again and ignited the crumpled newspaper that lay beneath the kindling that she had placed in the oven.

“Not gone be easy to get rid of Mr. Early,” said Ivey doubtfully. “Not after what we done.”

“You can do it, though,” said Sister earnestly. “I know you can.”

“I...could,” agreed Ivey tentatively.

“And you will?”

“What if it hurts?” Ivey asked.

“I don’t care!”

Ivey said nothing further. Sister grew impatient for more information, and said, “Well? Are you gone help me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It has to be soon,” Sister prodded. “He could be on his way here right this very minute. He could be here before I sit down to breakfast.”

“Miz Caskey, you in my way. I’m not never gone get breakfast on the table ’less you get out of here and leave me alone.”

Sister knew that tone in the black woman’s voice, so she backed out of the kitchen and returned to her bed, though not to sleep. Now that Ivey had agreed to assist her, Sister began to worry that Ivey would dally, and that the changes in her fate would not be rung in time.

An hour later, Sister and Miriam went down to breakfast together. When they had finished, Ivey dropped a small, corked blue bottle into the pocket of Sister’s dress.

“When you see him coming,” said Ivey in a low voice, “when you hear his voice, drink this.”

Sister pressed her hand against the bottle. Poison was stored in blue-glass bottles. “What will it do?”

“Drink every drop,” was all Ivey said, and then she turned away.

. . .

Miriam had finally grown so self-confident in her identity and position at the Caskey mill that she sometimes allowed herself to fall into conversation with her mother. After all, Miriam was in close conference with her father four or five times a day, and it hardly seemed acceptable that she completely ignore her mother. Besides, more than a quarter of a century had passed since Elinor had done the unforgivable—given Miriam away in exchange for her freedom from Mary-Love. Everyone in town accepted the fact that Miriam and her mother would never be close, and the understated reconciliation of the two was looked on rather as the affection between a dog and a cat is seen: an object of curiosity, and sentimentality—and

fascination. After all, one never knew at what moment the cat might claw out one of the mooning dog's eyes, or when the dog might snap up the cat in its fierce jaws.

Miriam and Elinor, however, had a common ground and interest that provided sufficient reason for a number of small private conferences. This common ground was money—the desire for the Caskeys to be even richer than they already were. Miriam would never have allowed her mother to speak to her on the subject of her manner of dress, or young men, or her conduct in regard to Sister or Queenie, but Miriam's ears prickled with interest when Elinor spoke to her of the Caskey finances. Sometimes, to everyone's surprise, Elinor and Miriam could be seen out in the yard, rocking slowly in one of the swings that hung between two of Elinor's water oaks. Miriam sat with her legs drawn up beneath her, and Elinor used one foot to keep the swing in motion; they were absorbed in deep conversation, the subject of which they would never subsequently reveal.

When Oscar called them in to supper, mother and daughter would enter the house separately, as if to deny what everyone had seen. And if Oscar in a whisper ventured to say to his daughter, "I'm so glad you and Elinor are starting to get along," Miriam would reply only, "It's less trouble to speak than it is not to speak, Oscar. That's all."

One Saturday afternoon early in April, Miriam and Elinor were sitting in the swing and quietly talking when Elinor suddenly said, "Let me ask you, Miriam—"

"What?" said Miriam suddenly and aggressively, as if she expected her mother to open some inappropriate matter of discussion.

Elinor paused for a moment, then asked a question that Miriam certainly hadn't expected: "How well do you know Grace and Lucille's farm?"

Miriam looked at her mother mistrustfully. She still wasn't used to being alone with her, and had been suspecting that Elinor would eventually use this quiet time together to put one over on her. She was now instantly defensive, trying to figure out what trick might lie behind this innocent question. Miriam decided to take it quite literally, and to answer with complete truthfulness. "I know how to get to there," said Miriam carefully. "And I've seen maps of the whole place. I know the house. I've been in the orchard, and one time Grace took me out to the pigpen and showed me a sow she had paid eight hundred dollars for. Once I went to see Luvadia in

the little house that Escue built for her on the other side of the pond next to the graveyard there."

"What about the swamp south of the property?"

"Well," said Miriam, with a loud exhalation of disapproval, "I know you encouraged her to buy it, and I know she bought it. I've seen it on a map, too, and it's enormous, four times as big as the farm itself. I know what she paid for it, and I know that it was the biggest waste of money since—"

"It wasn't a waste of money," said Elinor quietly.

"She cain't farm it!" cried Miriam. "She cain't do any cutting on it, 'cause there aren't any roads—and most of it is just swamp and quicksand anyway. She cain't sell hunting licenses—you know there are big cats still in that swamp? Big cats and alligators. So you tell me why it wasn't a waste of money."

"Miriam," said her mother, "this is between you and me, you hear?"

Miriam didn't respond. The idea of a confidence between Elinor and herself was not appealing.

"Miriam?" Elinor prompted after a moment.

"I don't make promises like that."

"I'm not asking for promises," said Elinor. "I just don't want you to say anything about what I'm going to tell you until the time is right...and ripe."

"What is it, then?"

"I know that land *looks* worthless. It looks worthless on the map. It'd look worthless if you rowed down the Perdido and looked at it from the river or if you were foolish enough to go traipsing around in it. I know that. And that's why Grace was able to get it so cheap."

"No piece of land is 'cheap' when you buy that much," Miriam pointed out. "Grace spent nearly everything that James left her. Now she doesn't have anything to fall back on."

"Grace didn't pay for all that land herself," said Elinor.

Miriam gave a small start. This was news to her.

"Oscar and I put up most of the money for that property," Elinor stated evenly.

"Why?" demanded Miriam, stunned.

"Because," Elinor replied in the same tone of voice, "underneath that swamp there is nothing but oil, oil, oil, and more oil."

. . .

The next day, Elinor and Miriam drove out to Gavin Pond Farm. When they knocked on Grace and Lucille's door, no one answered. Miriam went around to the side of the house, and then called out, "I see them! They're out in the pasture."

The sun shone bright and hot in a cloudless cerulean sky. The pecan trees wore their brightest spring leaves, whole and luscious, not yet covered with summer's dust or set upon by caterpillars. And below the trees, the pasture was awash in blooming clover. Lucille sat amid the ravishing red blossoms, with three-year-old Tommy Lee and two-year-old Sammy Sapp gamboling at her side. Grace stood a few yards in front of them taking photographs. The scene was a child's palette of colors: the blue sky above, the green pecan trees in the middle, and the red clover beneath. When the wind blew it seemed that the earth was covered in a sheet of flame.

Lucille saw Elinor and Miriam and waved.

Mother and daughter went out into the pasture. Miriam allowed her photograph to be taken with her mother's arm around her waist; Miriam picked up Sammy and Elinor picked up Tommy Lee and Grace snapped another picture. Then Elinor took a photograph of Lucille, Grace, and Miriam all sitting together in the clover.

When they returned to the house, Miriam turned to Grace and said, "Have you got those maps of that land you bought?"

"Of course," Grace replied.

"Can Elinor and I have a look at them?"

Puzzled, Grace said yes. The maps were spread out on the dining room table, and while Grace and Lucille went into the kitchen and prepared iced tea, they heard Elinor and Miriam speaking in low voices. Lucille peeked through the door, then went back to Grace and whispered, "They're pointing out things on the map."

"What on earth," said Grace, entering the dining room with a tray of glasses, "are y'all looking at on that map?"

Miriam and Elinor looked up in one motion, and each with the same bland smile said, "Nothing..."

. . .

On the drive back to Perdido with the late afternoon sun shining blindingly in their eyes, Miriam demanded of her mother, "How do you know about that oil?"

“That’s my secret with somebody else,” said Elinor.

“What does Oscar say about this?”

“I haven’t told him yet,” said Elinor. “He still thinks it was foolish to put up money for that land.”

This amazed Miriam as much as anything she’d heard yet. “You mean you’ve told *me*, but not Oscar?”

Elinor nodded.

“Why?”

“Because,” said Elinor, “Oscar knows everything there is to know about trees, and he doesn’t know much about anything else.”

“I don’t know anything about oil,” Miriam pointed out.

“But you do know about making money for the family,” said Elinor, “and that’s why I came to you. If I went to Oscar, Oscar would say, ‘Elinor, we’ve got enough money as it is, and I don’t know anything about oil.’ But if I come to you, you’re going to go right out and see if you can’t make some money off it. A lot of money.”

Miriam considered this as they drove through Babylon. On the highway toward Perdido, she said, “Why should I do anything? I’m not going to make anything off it. Why should I take the trouble? All that land belongs to you and Oscar and Grace and Lucille.” This wasn’t said with animosity, merely with thoughtfulness.

“No,” said Elinor. “Grace and Lucille own a quarter of it, Oscar and I own a quarter of it, we gave a quarter to Frances and Billy, and...” She paused significantly.

“And?”

“And Oscar and I signed over a quarter of it to you.”

“To me?” Miriam exclaimed. “I don’t need any presents from you,” she added hastily.

“It’s not meant to be a present. Oscar thinks of it like that, of course, but I made sure you got some because I knew that if you didn’t have an interest in it, you wouldn’t do anything about it.”

“And I wouldn’t have!” said Miriam with pride in her selfishness.

“So one-quarter of that property is yours.”

“Why does everybody keep talking about it as Grace’s then?”

“Because it’s part of Gavin Pond Farm, that’s all. And we wanted to keep the details secret.”

“Does Grace know that it’s been divided up this way?”

Elinor nodded. “She knows that Oscar and I put up most of the money. It’s the same as with the will: we all have quarter-*interests,* Miriam. It’s not that you own any particular four thousand acres, it’s that you own a quarter of the whole—and that you get a quarter of any money that land brings in.”

“Does Grace know about the oil?”

Elinor shook her head. “Just you and me.”

“What would Grace say if we were to send people out there to start drilling?”

“My guess,” said Elinor, “is that Grace wouldn’t like it one little bit.”

“For the time being,” said Miriam thoughtfully, “we ought not to say a word to anybody.”

Elinor smiled. “A secret between you and me.”

“Yes,” said Miriam, with reluctance. “I guess. I’m going to have to do a little thinking about this. Have you told Billy?”

“No. Just you.”

“Let me speak to Billy, if you don’t mind. Billy could probably be of some help.”

“If you like. But please ask him not to say anything to Frances,” cautioned Elinor. “Frances sometimes speaks when she ought not to.”

“Don’t worry. Billy won’t say anything.”

For the rest of the trip back to town, the two women were silent. Elinor drove with eyes half-closed against the lowering sun; Miriam was lost in concentration. She looked up in surprise when Elinor brought the car to a halt in front of her house. “Oh, we’re here already!” she said in astonishment.

Elinor started to get out of the car, but Miriam held her back with a word. “That quarter-interest,” she said. “The quarter-interest you and Oscar signed over to me.”

“What about it?”

“That was a gift, wasn’t it?”

“Absolutely not,” said Elinor as she got out of the car.

. . .

The remainder of that evening, Miriam was lost to the world. She sat absently at her parents’ table, paid no attention at all to the conversation on the upstairs porch after supper, and later could not fall asleep for thinking of the oil that lay under the swamp. She did not even hear Sister’s knock on the door of her room.

The knock was repeated, and finally Miriam called out in the darkness, "Sister?"

"Miriam," said Sister, opening the door softly. The hallway behind her was dark, too. "Miriam, am I waking you up?"

"No," replied Miriam. "What's wrong?"

"I wanted to speak to you. I couldn't sleep." Sister came in and sat at the foot of Miriam's bed. Though only fifty-five, Sister seemed to have aged beyond those years in the past month. Her dress and hair were untidy, her air abstracted. She was worried, everyone knew, about Early's return.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" asked Miriam.

"I'm worried about Early."

"I thought he'd already be here by now," remarked Miriam. "It's already the second week in April."

"Don't say that!" cried Sister. "I cain't hardly eat for thinking about what I'm gone do when he comes back."

"What *are* you gone do?" asked Miriam curiously.

"I don't know!" wailed Sister. The darkness seemed to increase her woe. "I don't know what to do! I feel like running away!"

"You'd better do it soon, then," said Miriam matter-of-factly.

"Where would I go?"

"Where would you *like* to go?"

"I don't want to go anywhere. I don't know anyplace but Perdido."

"You've been lots of places, Sister."

"I haven't been anywhere in ten years, it feels like."

"Sister," said Miriam with some impatience, "if you don't want to live with Early, then you don't have to. I don't know what all this fuss is about. When he shows up, just tell him to go away."

"I don't even want to see him!"

"Then *you* go away. And let's you and me just stop talking in circles about this."

With a quick movement, Sister grabbed Miriam's ankles beneath the bedspread. *"You* deal with Early."

"I will not," said Miriam. "Early is not my husband. This is none of my business."

"Would you let him come in here and take me away?" demanded Sister, offended at her niece's indifference.

“He cain’t take you away unless you decide to go with him. Besides, how do you know he still wants you? Maybe he’s just coming back to ask you for a divorce.”

“No, no! I know he’s not. He told me he wants to buy some bird dogs from Creola Sapp. If that’s not starting up a marriage again I don’t know what is. He’d have to have *me* to take care of his old damn dogs.”

“Sister,” said Miriam, “you are cutting off my circulation.” Sister let go of Miriam’s ankles and Miriam rubbed her feet about against the sheets to restore them. “Now listen, you are gone have to deal with Early, you are —”

Miriam never got any further with her advice, for at that moment the two women heard a car draw up before the house.

“Who in the world—” began Sister, but stopped in horror when she remembered suddenly just who *was* expected.

Trembling, she stood up from the side of the bed and went slowly to the window. Miriam got out of bed and followed her.

“Do you recognize the car?” asked Miriam. “It’s so late!”

Sister, peering through the screen, shook her head no. “Don’t turn on the light!” she cried. Miriam had crossed the room and was fumbling with the switch next to the door. “He’ll see us!”

Miriam returned to the window just as Sister jerked back. “It’s Early,” she whispered. “Oh, Lord. Why didn’t I go when the going was good?”

Miriam peered cautiously out the window. “He’s gotten so old,” she remarked.

Having removed a single small bag from the back seat of the car, Early Haskew walked up the sidewalk to the house. He was quickly lost to sight by an intervening eave.

Sister, in her agitation, paced around and around in the darkened room.

The doorbell rang twice, and they heard Early’s voice call out, “Sister! It’s me!”

Sister stood stock-still and whispered, “Go away! Go away!”

The doorbell rang like a clarion in the still, dark house.

“We’re gone have to let him in,” announced Miriam, marching toward the door of the bedroom.

“No, no,” pleaded Sister, grabbing hold of Miriam’s arm. Miriam wrenched free and moved out into the hall. Sister followed her, pleading

inarticulately. Miriam proceeded resolutely down the stairs, and Sister stayed at the top, convulsively grasping the newel post.

Downstairs, Miriam turned on the hall and porch lights, then pulled back the sheer curtains over the window in the door.

"Miriam?" said Early's muffled voice. "That you?"

"Just a minute," said Miriam, fumbling with the latch. She unlocked the door, then opened it. She unhooked the screen door and Early pulled it open.

"Hey, Miriam," he said.

"Hello, Early," replied Miriam. "We've been expecting you."

"Where's Sister?"

"Upstairs."

"Early..." The word came as a strangled whisper from the darkened hallway at the top of the stairs.

Sister, in her near-hysteria, had forgotten the stoppered blue bottle on her bedside table. Now she turned and fled down the darkened hallway—even as she heard Early and Miriam's voices downstairs—and raced into her room. She grabbed up the bottle, pulled out the cork, and drank the contents in two or three short gulps. She had expected bitterness, but the taste was cloyingly sweet, like undiluted blackberry syrup.

She put the bottle down and wondered what would happen.

But everything was the same; she felt no different. She still heard Early's voice below, alternating with Miriam's.

Ivey was getting old. Ivey was losing her touch. The syrup had been a mere placebo, to get Sister out of Ivey's kitchen.

Despairingly, Sister shuffled out of the darkened room and went to meet her fate, in the person of Early Haskew.

She reached the top of the stairs and peered down into the darkness below. *Why hasn't Miriam turned on any lights?* she wondered.

"Sister?" called out Early. "Sorry to—"

Sister started down the stairs into the blackness, but lowering her foot to the first stair, she realized quite suddenly that she was seeing *nothing* at all. The house was not merely dark and unlighted, she was herself blind. *That* was what Ivey had meant by "hurting." *Blind!* How could Ivey have...Sister, having already been in a state of near-panic, now opened her mouth in a soundless scream. She tried to turn, perhaps with the thought of seeking refuge once again in her room. But her legs tangled themselves

together, and she was unable to retain her balance. In a jumble of nightclothes and loose hair and flailing limbs she rolled from the top of the stairs to the bottom. Before Miriam could make a move, Sister Haskew lay broken and twisted at the feet of her returned husband.

Chapter 61

Early's Promise

Early and Miriam lifted the unconscious form of Sister from the floor and laid her on the horsehair sofa in the front parlor. While Early stood helplessly over his wife, whom he hadn't seen since the height of the war four years before, Miriam telephoned Leo Benquith, Elinor, and Queenie. Queenie became hysterical, Elinor calmed her down, and Leo Benquith examined Sister briefly. He telephoned for an ambulance, and Sister was moved to Sacred Heart Hospital in Pensacola that very night.

Three ribs and her left leg had been broken in the fall. She had hit her head severely, but roused from unconsciousness during the ride to Pensacola. Miriam and Elinor were in a car behind the ambulance, and Early drove in his car behind them. They weren't allowed to see Sister until late the next morning. Though tightly bandaged over her chest and with her left leg raised in grotesque traction, they found her to be astonishingly and incongruously cheerful.

"Come kiss me, Miriam!" she cried. "And tell me you forgive me."

Miriam leaned over the pillow and kissed Sister on the cheek. "I forgive you. But for what?"

"For being so clumsy," Sister laughed gaily. "For falling from the top of the stairs all the way down to the bottom."

"It was hardly your fault," said Elinor. "It was dark and—"

"Was it ever!" exclaimed Sister. "I couldn't see a damned thing! I was *blind!"* she giggled. "But I see *fine* now."

"You had been asleep," Elinor went on. "You were excited about seeing Early again."

At the mention of his name, Early stepped forward to the foot of the bed and sheepishly waved to his wife with the hat he held in his hands.

"Hey, Early," said Sister. "How you doing?"

"Fine, Sister, just fine."

"Elinor, Miriam," Sister whispered. "Y'all get out for a minute and let me talk to Early by myself."

Elinor and Miriam exchanged glances. This was so unlike Sister's attitude toward her husband before her accident that they were at a loss as

to what to make of it. But, nodding to Early, they left the room.

"Sister," said Early, coming around to the head of the bed, "I know you must be in pain—"

"I'm in *terrible* pain," cried Sister. "You don't *know* how much I'm suffering, Early. I am just so sorry this had to happen the minute you got back from wherever it was you were."

"Guildford. That's in England. Bridge work."

"Lord, you do get around. You about to go off again?"

"Nope. Thought I'd come back to Perdido and fetch you and we'd go off somewhere and start raising dogs again. Sister, you cain't imagine what it is like to go through life without a dog. I get so damned *lonely* out there building bridges and levees and I-don't-know-what-all. Cain't go carting a dog around Europe, though. They don't allow it."

"Well, Early," said Sister. "Look at me in this bed."

"I see you," said Early, whistling.

"Do I look like I'm in shape to start feeding puppies with a nipple-bottle?"

"Only if somebody handed 'em to you."

"Cain't bring puppies in this hospital, Early. No dogs now, and no dogs for a long time to come."

"When they say you're gone be well again?"

Sister hesitated. "They don't know. They don't have any idea."

"Those bandages look tight. Can you breathe?"

"It hurts to breathe," admitted Sister, drawing in two or three difficult breaths. After a few moments, she had apparently recovered herself. "See, Early, what I was thinking was, it's not gone be any fun for you to hang around Perdido while I am mending my broken bones. It's not gone be any fun for you to wait on me hand and foot."

"What happened to Ivey?"

"Ivey's still there, but Ivey has to keep that house going. She doesn't have time for me."

"What about Miriam?"

"Oh, Early, you don't know how hard Miriam works over at that mill. You never saw anybody work harder. Besides, Miriam's not the type you want to ask to go down to the kitchen and fix a cup of coffee for you."

"I guess not," admitted Early. "Why don't you hire a nurse?"

“I’m gone have to,” said Sister eagerly. “That’s just what I was thinking I was gone have to do. I’ll get the hospital to recommend somebody. That nurse can stay in the spare bedroom, and take care of me all day every day. But see, with a nurse in the spare bedroom, there wouldn’t be any place for you to sleep, Early.”

“I’d sleep with you!” cried Early in surprise. “Where else would I sleep?”

Sister laughed nervously. “You old lummox! And roll over on top of me and break all my bones again? Early, in three years, you have gotten so fat! You are as big as a house.”

“I used to work it off,” said Early quietly. “But now it all just sits there. But you could punch me in the belly, Sister, and I wouldn’t even feel it.”

“Early, I cain’t even lift my arms. What I was thinking was, why don’t you go off again for a while—get a job somewhere just for the time being, go find yourself a river and build a bridge over it—and then give me a call and I’ll tell you when I’m gone be all right again. And when I’m all right again, you can come pick me up.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” said Early. “What would people think if I ran off and left you in this condition?”

“Lord, Early! People in Perdido don’t even remember who you are. Anyway, why do you care what they think?”

Early shrugged. He had seated his great bulk in a small wooden chair at the side of the bed. The substance of Sister’s conversation was beginning to register in his brain, and he understood that she was sending him away again. Sending him away not a dozen hours after he had arrived. His jowls went slack, and a look came into his eyes that reminded Sister of the puppies he loved so much. She struggled to maintain her resolve, even as she realized that he had begun to understand what was happening to him.

Then she did what she thought she would never have the courage to do. She spoke the unadorned truth.

“Early,” she said, “you and I aren’t married anymore.”

A look of bewilderment came into his eyes. “Did you get a divorce or something?”

Sister shook her head sadly. “I should never have married you. It was all my fault.”

“Hey...Sister,” protested Early weakly, “I love you...”

"I'm an old maid," returned Sister. "Everybody knows it. I was an old maid when I was twelve years old, and I was fighting nature when I got married to you. Then when you went away on your old war work, I became an old maid the minute you walked out the door—and being an old maid is what suits me."

"Sister, I have no idea in the world what you are talking about."

"It doesn't matter, Early. I just want you to go away."

A nurse came into the room, smiled, spoke softly, and examined the bandages and the traction apparatus. Early sat very still, gazing across the bed and out the window. In those few moments of silence, all Sister's good spirits evaporated. She hadn't the stamina to prop them up indefinitely in Early's presence. At the same time, Early's solicitousness for his wife's injuries and discomforts were swamped by his realization that she wanted nothing more than to be rid of him forever. When the nurse had gone Early stood up, looked at Sister and said, "We're still married. We're gone be married forever. You're my wife and there's not nothing gone change that. I'm gone go away now. I'm gone go build me a bridge or something, but the minute they let you up out of that bed, I'm coming to get you. You understand that? I'm coming to get you, and I'm taking you away. I can do it, Sister, because we're married and I'm your husband. So mend them bones and get your bags packed, 'cause then I'm gone drag you all over this damn country and Europe, too. You understand?"

Sister did not reply. She turned her head aside on the pillow, away from her husband. Early walked out of the room and motioned with his head for Elinor and Miriam to go back in.

. . .

Sister remained in the hospital in Pensacola. She declared that only Miriam could visit. With a dutifulness born of affection that surprised everyone, Miriam drove to Pensacola every night after she had finished at the mill and spent the night there on an army cot set up at the side of Sister's bed. She drove back to Perdido early the next morning in time for breakfast with Elinor and Oscar. She never complained of this regimen and never deviated from it. Sister was morose, Miriam said. Sister had never been so unhappy. She wasn't mending as quickly as the doctors thought she ought to.

Oscar shook his head, and carefully folded his napkin. "Poor Sister!"

Miriam said, "Sister doesn't *want* to get well."

"Why on earth not?" demanded Frances.

“Because when she gets well,” explained Miriam, “Early Haskew’s gone come back to Perdido and take her away.”

“Lord!” cried Elinor, “he can’t take her away unless she wants to go.”

“You cain’t talk to Sister about it,” shrugged Miriam. “And I don’t want anybody here to mention the fact that I said one word about it.”

After three weeks Sister was released from the hospital. According to the X-rays, she was as well as could be expected, though she still complained of pain, difficulty in breathing, and a lack of sensation in her left leg. The hospital had offered to recommend a nurse, but to this, Sister said, “No, my family will take care of me. And if they won’t then I’d just as soon die anyway.”

Sister was driven home in an ambulance, and Grace and Ivey, under Leo Benquith’s direction, carried her upstairs and put her in bed. Leo examined her once more, told her she’d be up and about within a month, and then left. Sister said, “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. It will be six months before I can walk again. I know that. Ivey, get me a cup of coffee, will you? You don’t know how much I’ve missed your cooking. Grace, you go right next door and tell Queenie to get herself over here and keep me company. She doesn’t have anything *else* to do all day, so she might as well make herself useful.”

Grace was amused. This was a new Sister. Never had she been so decisive, so opinionated, so imperious. Here she lay, in her bed with two extra mattresses and three extra pillows, giving orders and making judgments with as much ease as Mary-Love had so many years before.

Queenie was duly brought to Sister’s bedside. “It sure is nice—” she began, but was impatiently interrupted by Sister.

“Come over here and fix my pillows. I am slipping down in the bed.”

Queenie placed one fat arm behind the invalid’s back, shifted her into a sitting position, and rearranged the pillows behind her. She eased Sister back down.

Sister sighed, and said, “Just right.”

“I used to take care of my daddy when he was sick,” declared Queenie. “I know all about sickrooms.”

“I am not sick!” cried Sister. “I am crippled!”

. . .

Here were changes no one could have predicted. Sister returned from Pensacola an invalid, her very nature altered along with her body. A few

days later Oscar approached Miriam and said, “You were down there with her every night. Did you notice a change?”

Miriam shook her head. “I don’t understand it.”

Nobody could figure it out, but the changes were unmistakably there. Sister, who in years past had made a habit of anticipating the desires of others, now seemed to think of nothing but her own comfort. She was the axis of her household. Ivey Sapp did nothing but wait on her, bringing her endless cups of coffee and plates of cookies, which was all she liked to eat during the day, and taking her a specially prepared supper at night on a tray. And strangest of all, the only help that Sister gladly suffered was that of Queenie. Queenie sat with Sister an hour in the morning, two or three hours in the afternoon, and an hour or two in the evening. Nobody but Queenie could fix Sister’s pillows to her satisfaction. Medicine was undrinkable except when Queenie held the spoon. Unless Queenie fixed the curtains, the room was either drafty or stuffy. Ivey’s cooking was inedible unless Queenie was there to watch Sister eat.

Elinor shook her head, and said to Queenie, “Sister is worse than Mary-Love ever was. I wouldn’t blame you if you moved away, just so that you could get a little peace.”

“I don’t mind,” returned Queenie. “It gives me something to do now that James is gone. I feel like I’m earning my keep.”

Chapter 62

The Swamp

The relationship between Elinor Caskey and her daughter Miriam had become less strained than it ever had been. Neither, it appeared, had anything more to prove to the other. If Miriam never displayed a great deal of affection toward her mother, at least she never showed any animosity. Elinor's only words against her formerly estranged daughter concerned Miriam's wardrobe, which Elinor considered embarrassingly casual for a young woman of Miriam's station in the town.

One Saturday morning early in June, after breakfast, Elinor knocked on the screen door of Miriam's house, and called out her daughter's name.

Miriam came to the door but didn't open it. "You want to see Sister?" she asked.

"I want to see you," said Elinor.

Miriam came warily out onto the porch.

"I came to ask if you would take a little ride with me this morning."

"Where?"

"You'll find out."

Miriam refused to give her mother the satisfaction of any more questions. "Let's go," she said, and marched down the front steps.

Mother and daughter got into Elinor's car, and drove out of town, heading south down a rarely used road that ran along the western bank of the Perdido. After ten miles or so, this road petered out altogether, and Elinor turned onto a bumpy logging track. They passed evidence of recent timber cutting.

"This is our land," remarked Miriam conversationally. "Oscar was out here on Thursday, I believe."

Elinor drove on for another couple of miles, saying nothing. Then even the logging track disappeared. They were in the darkest depths of the forest. Miriam looked about, deliberately damping her curiosity and wonder, and said nothing.

"Get out," said Elinor.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," said Miriam, but it wasn't an argument. She got out of the car.

Elinor had already taken off into the forest, heading east. The sun had been shining murkily through hazy clouds, but in the woods little of its light reached the needle-carpeted ground because of the high canopy of pine boughs.

“I should have worn long sleeves,” muttered Miriam, following Elinor and swatting at ferocious mosquitoes that continually alighted on her arms.

The low brush recently had been burned off preparatory to logging, so walking was relatively easy. But every footstep brought up a stink of charred greenery.

After they had gone about a quarter of a mile, Miriam caught a glimpse of flowing water. “That’s the Perdido,” she said. A few steps ahead of her, Elinor nodded.

“If you had wanted to show me the Perdido,” Miriam remarked, “you could have taken me to the top of the levee.”

Elinor did not respond.

Elinor halted above a strip of red sand and gravel, several yards wide, that had been left when the river had slightly altered its course not long before. This forlorn little beach was strewn with sticks, tufts of pine needles, and a few decaying carcasses of dead birds and rodents. A small green boat had been dragged up onto this strand, out of reach of the current.

The Perdido, a hundred feet wide here, flowed swiftly by. On the western bank of the river, where Elinor and Miriam now stood, the pine forest was uninterrupted as far downstream and upstream as could be seen. But on the opposite side of the river the land was different.

“Ah,” said Miriam, understanding at last. “That’s the swamp.”

“Yes,” said Elinor, and she stepped down on to the red, gravelly beach in the direction of the boat.

Across the river there was no real shore, only a succession of hammocks of tall grass, cypress, and palmetto. Insects swarmed in slowly roiling clouds above the hammocks. The water of the Perdido at the edge of the swamp seemed hardly to flow at all, and it changed from its usual deep red to a nearly unreflecting black.

“You’re planning on taking me across?” Miriam asked uneasily, as her mother effortlessly dragged the boat toward the water.

“That swamp is going to make us all very, very rich, Miriam. You know it and I know it, but this morning at the breakfast table it occurred to me that you had never even seen it.”

“I haven’t—and I’m not sure I want to.”

“Why not?” asked Elinor. She had shoved the boat into the water and only her foot, placed in the prow, kept the little craft from being carried out into the current and down to the Gulf of Mexico.

“Elinor, we’re going to be eaten up over there. Look at those bugs!”

“They’re blind,” said Elinor.

“What?” asked Miriam, stepping forward and gingerly getting into the boat despite her protestations.

“Hand me the paddle,” said Elinor. As Miriam obediently did as she was told, her mother further explained, “They’re mosquitoes, but they’re blind. They don’t bite.”

“I think,” said Miriam crossly, “that you are making that up.”

Elinor sat down in the boat, and in another moment the current had pulled them several yards downstream. Behind the levees in town the Perdido was strong and fast-moving, but it was not as strong and fast-moving as *this*, Miriam thought uncomfortably.

But as soon as Elinor had placed the paddle into the water, the boat halted its downstream course. Its nose turned easily, and with no effort apparent in the muscles of Elinor’s arms, they were headed directly across the river.

They drew nearer to the hammocks and the clouds of insects. Miriam shrank back, but said nothing. The red water of the Perdido left off in a line that seemed unnaturally abrupt, and the fetid black water of the swamp was suddenly all around the boat.

“Lord!” exclaimed Miriam. “It stinks!”

“It smells like every swamp,” said Elinor.

It seemed to Miriam that her mother was paddling them directly into the grassy shore, and she grasped the sides of the boat, prepared for a jolt. But no jolt came. The tall grasses parted before them, their sharp-edge stalks, dry feathery flowers, and rasping seeded spikes slashing along Miriam’s arms and face. A cloud of insects descended over the boat, and enveloped it like the Egyptian plague. Miriam cried out, and mosquitoes filled her mouth and nostrils. She flailed her arms madly, shook her head, then crouched down in the bottom of the boat to escape the buzzing swarm; then the cloud lifted.

Miriam looked up and around in surprise.

Elinor paddled unperturbed. “They’re only at the edge of the swamp,” she said. “Now you have to watch out for the ones that *do* bite.” Miriam slapped one that had just bitten her on the wrist.

“I hate this,” said Miriam.

“I knew you would,” returned her mother, “but I still thought you ought to see it.”

Miriam nodded and looked around, still uncomfortably, but with interest. The only picture she had had in her mind of the swamp south of Gavin Pond Farm had come from her knowledge of the cypress swamp between Perdido and Atmore. But this swamp was wholly unlike that: this place was vast, but cramped with clogged waterways and overgrown hammocks and what seemed entire continents of rotted tree trunks overgrown with moss. Birds screeched everywhere, and small animals scuttled secretively away. Everything stank, and everything was rotting. Parasite festered on parasite. Nothing existed that wasn’t adulterated with decay. Elinor paddled quickly, and they slipped deeper into the swamp. Miriam mechanically slapped at mosquitoes and stared at everything around her.

“Elinor,” said Miriam, “what I cain’t understand, is how you find your way around in all this. You act like you are looking at a road map.”

Elinor only laughed. “I don’t know *where* I am,” she said.

“Are you gone get us out of here?” Miriam said, suddenly alarmed.

Elinor merely nodded, raised her paddle smoothly, and pushed away an alligator that rose lazily to the surface of the murky water beside the boat.

After half an hour Elinor caught the exposed roots of a toppled cypress with her paddle and dragged the boat over to a rotting hammock that looked to Miriam exactly like countless others they had passed. Orchids grew in the crotch of the overturned cypress, and snakes slithered out of a smooth hole just beneath.

"Get out,” said Elinor.

“Is it safe?”

“Just don’t put your hand on anything, that’s all.” Elinor held the boat steady, and Miriam gingerly climbed out onto the hammock. The ground beneath the rotting grass was slimy; she slid back, and one foot slipped into the water. She felt a stinging sensation, and when she brought it up again, she found that three leeches had attached themselves to her ankle. But

before Miriam had even had a chance to cry out, Elinor leaned over, plucked them off, and crushed them in her hand till the blood flowed around her fingers.

Miriam stood, shuddering slightly, atop the hammock. “All right,” she said, “now what?”

“Nothing,” said Elinor. “I just wanted to show you the spot where they drill first.”

Miriam looked down at her mother, then gazed around in a little careful circle. Swamp, slime, and decay. What had been green was turning brown, what had been brown was turning black. The sky was washed-out looking; the sun a pale white disc. The air was close, still, heavy.

Miriam suddenly felt dizzy. She looked down again at her mother. Elinor was wiping away the remains of the crushed leeches on the side of the boat. She waggled her hand in the water to cleanse it of gore.

This must have been the action of only a few seconds, but to Miriam, standing on the hammock, dizzy and numbed, those simple actions of her mother’s appeared to take hours. Miriam watched Elinor’s hand as it disappeared beneath the surface of the water at the side of the boat, watched Elinor’s delicate wrist move back and forth, and watched as that hand withdrew from the water.

The birds’ cries were overridden now by a new sound, a song that Miriam had never heard. But no, she had heard it, in her dreams; in twenty-five years of dreams, in her bed in the room that looked out to the levee.

The old song beat through her brain, and she forgot who she was, where she was, and whom she was with. She closed her eyes and listened to that song—listened intensely but for what seemed only a very few seconds. Yet when she opened her eyes again, the pale disc of the sun had traveled farther across the sky and now shone dimly through other branches of the cypress above her.

“Come down,” said Elinor. Her voice sounded muffled and far away.

Miriam slipped down the side of the hammock and climbed into the boat.

“We’d better go back now,” said Elinor. “They’re going to wonder where we are.”

Miriam made no reply, and as her mother expertly paddled the boat back toward the river by a different route from the one that they had taken

before, Miriam made no remark and asked no questions. She did not even turn around.

Miriam again saw the clouds of blind mosquitoes that marked the edge of the swamp. As the boat got closer, the insects descended again and Miriam was again lacerated by the sharp grasses. The boat slipped into the red waters of the Perdido, and Miriam thought that the river had never looked so clean and wholesome before. Soon they were once again on the western bank. Elinor hopped out and pulled the boat onto the wretched little gravelly beach. She held out her hand to Miriam.

Miriam shook her head and struggled out of the boat without assistance.

They walked back to the car in silence. Elinor again was a few steps ahead of her daughter.

As they got into the car Miriam remarked: “I thought you were gone leave me in that swamp.”

“No,” said Elinor, unperturbed by the statement. “I just thought you ought to see it.”

“Thank you,” said Miriam, with a slight stiffness, as her mother started the engine.

. . .

One afternoon about two weeks after Elinor and Miriam’s visit to the swamp, Lucille Strickland was surprised to see Miriam’s car pull up before the farmhouse. With Tommy Lee following behind her, Lucille went outside to greet the visitor. “What on earth are you doing out here?”

“Hello to you, too,” said Miriam, slamming shut the car door.

Lucille laughed. “No, I just meant, what got you out from behind that old desk of yours?”

“I need to speak to you and Grace.”

“Grace and Escue are out in the corn. Let me go call her. Here, take Tommy Lee inside. There’s a pitcher of iced tea in the refrigerator.”

“Is it sweet?” asked Miriam, grabbing Tommy Lee’s hand and dragging him up the steps of the porch.

“Yes, but I’ll make some for you that isn’t.”

In a few minutes, the three women were seated around the dining room table. Tommy Lee was on Grace’s lap. Grace was deeply sunburned from all the time she spent out in the fields. Her hair had turned a streaked, golden blond. In contrast, Lucille’s face was pale, for she never went

without a broad-brimmed straw hat. She had lost her pastiness, however, and was as plump now as Queenie had been when she first arrived in Perdido. Her arms were red and freckled, and she was fearsomely proud of her calloused hands, for they showed her family how hard she worked for love of Grace and Gavin Pond Farm. An oscillating fan on highest speed was set on another chair.

Grace and Lucille looked expectantly at Miriam. Miriam had never visited on a weekday afternoon before. She had placed a clipboard of papers before her, and she took a fountain pen out of her dress pocket; she wasted no time in getting to the point.

"This is about that old swampland south of here."

"What about it?" said Grace warily.

"First thing is," said Miriam, "we are buying more. I just found another parcel next to what we already have, about eighteen hundred acres. So I've bought it, and I need your signatures."

"Miriam, Lucille and I don't have any money for more land! We're strapped as it is."

"Queenie is lending you the money," said Miriam firmly. "And that's *this* paper." She set out a second paper, and unscrewed the cap of the pen.

"Well, now," said Grace slowly, "nobody likes property better than me, but Miriam, are you sure we need it? I mean it's just swamp, right? Nothing but mosquitoes and alligators and quicksand, right? How much did you have to pay?"

"Eighty dollars an acre," answered Miriam.

"Lord, God!" cried Grace, and the exertion of her surprise lifted Tommy Lee right off her lap and dropped him into Lucille's. "I could get me Black Belt soil for eighty dollars an acre. What in the world are you thinking of, paying that kind of money?"

Miriam sighed. "Grace, just sign. You're not out one penny. You know and I know you're never gone have to pay Queenie back. You and Lucille get one-fourth title to that property, Elinor and Oscar get one-fourth, Frances and Billy get one-fourth, and I get one-fourth. Just sign," she repeated, holding out the pen.

"I don't understand this one single bit," Grace murmured as she signed both documents. Lucille handed Tommy Lee back and took the pen in turn.

"Anything else?" asked Grace. "From the look of that stack of papers, we could be here all afternoon."

“Just one other,” said Miriam, taking out a single page from the bottom.

Grace took it and looked it over. “I don’t understand this.”

“That’s ’cause you cain’t read it,” said Lucille. “Grace cain’t read a thing without her reading glasses. She *won’t* wear ’em.”

“I see just fine out in the fields,” said Grace, signing the document. “I hope you’re not tricking us, Miriam.”

“Don’t worry,” said Miriam, placing the page in front of Lucille.

“How’s Frances?” Lucille asked.

“Big as a house,” said Miriam.

“What is this paper?” asked Grace.

“Permission to drill,” replied Miriam, clipping it back to the board.

“What the hell does that mean?” demanded Grace.

Miriam stood up. “That means,” she said, “that there is oil under all that swampland.”

“Lord!” cried Lucille, putting down Tommy Lee. “You are joking, Miriam!”

“I am not. I am going to Houston in a couple of weeks and talk to some people.”

“You mean,” said Grace, “that you just got me to sign a paper I couldn’t even read that says some old oil company can bring in their men and their machinery and their I-don’t-know-what-all and tear up our property? Is that what I just signed? Where are my reading glasses?”

“That’s right,” said Miriam, heading toward the door.

“They’re all gone sink in the quicksand,” said Lucille in consolation.

“Lord, Grace,” said Miriam, with her hand on the doorknob, “they’re not gone bother *you.”*

“They’ll be here!”

“Two miles away, you’re not even gone hear ’em.”

“How you know there’s oil down there?” asked Lucille. “You send somebody swimming down to the bottom of that old swamp?”

“Elinor said so,” Miriam said as she walked out the door.

Grace and Lucille stood together in the doorway, watching Miriam get back into her car. “Don’t you bring any more papers out here to me,” cried Grace, “’cause I’m gone tear ’em up in your face!”

Miriam switched on the ignition, turned the car around, and called out the window, “Lucille, nine months from now, you are gone be sewing

dresses out of one-hundred-dollar bills!”

Chapter 63

Twins

Late one morning before anyone had come home for dinner, Frances and Elinor sat on the screened porch. The day was already hot, and the kudzu leaves on the levee were wilted. Frances sat close to the edge of the porch to catch the rare gusts of air that wafted across the yard. Her mother rocked slowly on the glider, taking in the hem of an old skirt for Zaddie.

Frances was in great discomfort. Her frame was not large, and the distension of her pregnant stomach was enormous. More than anything, she longed for her old sense of balance, for a feeling of walking upright again. Now she could move across the room only with difficulty, if not actual pain.

"Mama," sighed Frances, "I didn't know it was gone be like this. Right now, I feel like I don't want to *move* until I go into labor."

"I know it's hard, darling, but you've got to get up and move around. You've got to get a little exercise, for the sake of your children."

"Children?" repeated Frances in astonishment.

Elinor looked up as if she had spoken inadvertently. "Yes," she said after a moment, "twins. Sweetheart, why in the world do you think you're so big?"

"Mama, how do you know for sure?"

"I know," said Elinor, "because I was a twin, too."

"You told me you had a sister, but you never told me—"

"Nerita and I were twins, that's right. But we were even more different than you and Miriam."

"All right, but how do you know *I'm* gone have twins?"

Elinor didn't answer at first. "Frances," she then said softly, "come over here and sit beside me on the glider."

With some careful maneuvering Frances did so. Elinor continued to rock the glider with her foot, slowly and rhythmically. Frances started to speak, but Elinor said, "Shhh! Close your eyes, darling."

Frances obeyed.

"Block out the light. Block out the sun and the heat. Listen to me and what I say and don't think of anything else."

Elinor spoke in a low, soft voice as she methodically stitched in the new hem on the skirt in her lap. “Frances darling, you hear me speaking to you and you hear my voice. You feel that little breeze on the back of your neck and you know that breeze blew over the Perdido because you can smell the river in that air. You smell that water and you know where that breeze came from. You know what trees and what branches it blew through. You smell those water oaks. Water oaks have a different smell from all other trees and even from each other. Water oaks even have names the way you and I have names, only we can’t say them aloud. When the wind blows through a water oak the water oak speaks its name. You hear those names?”

Frances nodded slowly.

“You keep your eyes closed and it’s black behind there, it’s black inside your whole body and there’s Frances right inside her own body and no light will ever get in and it’s like being at the bottom of the river with no light reaching you through the muddy water. But oh Lord, Frances. You can see what there is to see in there. You can go anywhere you want in that darkness, just like you could swim anywhere on the bottom of the river if you wanted to. You try it. See, you’re not on the bottom after all. You can dive down deeper, so do it. Now go even deeper. You can see where you’re going even though there’s no light. Go all the way down. See how easy it is? Oh, Frances, you know what you’re looking for. You’re looking for two little babies, two little babies that are all yours. I remember, Frances, I remember going down to the bottom once and seeing you, and I thought, ‘Oh, this little girl is precious. I’m going to love this little girl like nobody’s business,’ and you know what? Your eyes were open, and you looked back at me and your mouth opened, and you said, ‘Hey, Mama,’ and I said, ‘Hey, little girl’ because you didn’t have a name yet. You...”

Elinor broke off. Beside her, Frances’s body was rigid, her eyelids were quivering, and her mouth twitched. Elinor heard a car pull up in front of the house. By its sound she knew it to be Oscar’s. She went on speaking to her daughter in a voice that was much lower, quicker, and more urgent.

“See, Frances, two babies, just like I told you. See, they’re just fine, both of them, so swim back on up to the top. Say goodbye to your babies—*don’t touch them*—and turn around and swim back up. Go right back up to your eyelids. You’ll be able to find them; they’re little cracks of sunlight. Swim straight up. Hurry, darling. When you get back up there, turn around

just one more time and sit down slowly and get yourself comfortable again, and now, Frances, *open your eyes."*

Downstairs, the screen door slammed, and the hallway was filled with the voices of Elinor's husband and eldest daughter.

Frances's eyes were open and she was trembling. "Mama—" she whispered.

"Shhh!"

Oscar was coming up the stairs.

"Mama!" cried Frances peremptorily.

Elinor turned to her daughter. "Twins?"

"There were two of them," answered Frances evasively.

"Two girls? Like Nerita and me?"

"One of them was a girl," said Frances, still trembling.

"And one was a boy?" asked her mother.

Oscar appeared smiling in the door. "That baby hasn't come *yet?"* he laughed. "Frances, I am getting anxious for my first grandchild. You ought to hurry it up."

"And one was a boy?" whispered Elinor anxiously in her daughter's ear.

"One of them was a girl," Frances repeated, and awkwardly raised herself from the glider.

. . .

Frances was silent during the noontime meal that day and excused herself before anyone else was finished. She retreated to her room. Billy started to get up and follow her, but putting aside her napkin, Elinor said, "No. You stay here, let me see about her."

Frances lay on the bed atop the covers, dry-eyed and motionless. All the shades in the room were drawn, and it was stifling hot.

"Let me turn on the fan," said Elinor as she entered.

She crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. She took Frances's limp, sweating hand in her own.

"Mama," said Frances, "when the time comes..." She choked back a sob.

Elinor nodded. "When the time comes for you to have your babies..."

"...I want you there, and nobody else. Nobody else in the whole house. Send Billy and Daddy away. Send Zaddie out on an errand."

"I'll need some help, darling. Zaddie can help me."

"No, I—"

"There's nothing," said Elinor slowly, "that Zaddie hasn't seen and doesn't know about. Do you understand what I'm saying? There's nothing that Zaddie wouldn't do for me and you. That's been true ever since Zaddie was a little tiny girl and used to rake the yards for Mary-Love."

Elinor continued to hold her daughter's hand.

"Mama," whispered Frances, weeping now, "you know what I saw?"

Elinor nodded. "I know now. I know why you're upset."

"Shouldn't I be!"

Elinor smiled. "It's just like Nerita and me. Those two babies are going to be as different as night and day, as different as air and water, as different as life and death."

"But what will I do—"

"I'll *show* you what to do, darling, there's nothing to worry about. All I have to do is think of a way to get Oscar and Billy out of the house when the time comes."

. . .

Frances's belly continued to swell, to the point that even Billy and Oscar wondered whether she was carrying more than just one child. Frances was depressed, and asked that her husband sleep in the front room; she was too uncomfortable, she said, sharing a bed at this time. Billy complied without a murmur.

At the beginning of July, Frances began to press her mother to have Oscar and Billy leave the house. When she gave birth, she wanted to make sure that she was alone.

One morning after breakfast, the moment that Oscar and Billy had walked out of the door on their way to work, Frances said to her mother: "One week."

"You know for sure?" Elinor asked, pleased.

"Yes," replied Frances. "One week for sure."

"Frances, it's going to be hard to get Oscar and Billy out of the house. Billy is going to want to stay here with you. Wouldn't it make more sense for you and Zaddie and me to go off somewhere for a few days?"

Frances looked at her mother strangely. "No," she said, with a touch of surprise in her voice. "Mama, you know we have to be near the river."

Elinor smiled, as if her suggestion had been a kind of test and Frances had given the right answer.

“Sweetheart,” said Elinor, “you’re changing, you know that?”

Frances nodded. Her smile was rueful. “I know things I didn’t use to know.”

“It’s difficult for you...”

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Frances. “But I don’t have any choice, do I?”

Elinor shook her head no. “What do you feel?” asked her mother curiously.

Frances sat back in her chair, and thought about this for a few moments, then replied carefully, “I feel different. I understand things I never used to understand. I see things I never saw before. Hear things I never heard before. The water oaks *do* have names, and I know what they are. I can sit here in this chair and feel that breeze through the screen and I know where it’s been. I couldn’t put it down on paper, but I know. I feel like there are changes in my body, and I think it’s something more than having a baby. They say all women’s systems change when they get pregnant, but this is something more than that. There’s something different about the way I move, about the way things feel when I pick them up. I’m not sure what it is. Mama, am I really *changing?”*

“We all change. Even you. Even me.”

“Yes, but Mama, I feel—and this is going to sound crazy—I feel like I’m getting *younger.* And that’s not what you’re supposed to feel when you’re having babies for the first time. You’re supposed to feel like you’re growing up.”

“You don’t feel younger, you just feel happier, that’s all.”

Frances shook her head, and then asked thoughtfully, “How old are you?”

Elinor smiled, “I have never answered that question. Not for anybody. How old do you think I am?”

“Well, I think you’re Daddy’s age. And Daddy’s fifty-three.”

“Is that how old I look?”

“You look like you could be fifty-three,” said Frances. “I mean, you’re beautiful, Mama, but you look like you could be fifty-three. What year were you born? Are you older than Daddy or younger?”

“I don’t know. I lost my birth certificate in the flood of 1919.”

“But you must know how old you are.”

“Well, darling, some people say you shouldn’t measure your age by how many birthdays you’ve had, but by how young you feel. And even

though I'm about to have my first grandchildren, I feel very young. And you, too, you said it—you feel like you're getting younger, and I'm sure you are."

As Elinor called Zaddie in for more coffee, Frances considered this. "Mama," she asked, when Zaddie had gone back to the kitchen, "how long would I live if I lived in the water, all the time I mean?"

"Shhh!" said Elinor, with a toss of her head indicating the kitchen door.

"I thought you said Zaddie knew all our secrets."

"Zaddie knows *some* secrets, darling, but we are not a parade with banners. And you shouldn't be asking me questions like this, not..."

"Not what?"

"Not at breakfast."

"Oh," laughed Frances. "I'm just supposing. Now just suppose I lived at the bottom of some old river somewhere, I wonder how long I'd live. I wonder if I'd live longer than people living on the land."

Elinor appeared uncomfortable; she toyed with her cup, turning it slowly around in its saucer.

"You might," she said hesitantly.

"And twenty-five years old on the land is all grown-up, but maybe twenty-five years old under the water, at the bottom of some river, is not that old. Maybe there twenty-five is still just a little girl."

"It might be," said Elinor.

"And maybe," Frances went on, more seriously, "and maybe if a twenty-five-year-old woman on the land were always *thinking* about the bottom of the river, and dreaming about it and seeing it when she closed her eyes and hearing it when she put her hands over her ears, maybe then she would start to feel younger."

"She might," said Elinor.

"And what if—oh—" Frances broke off with a sudden exclamation and a look of surprise.

"What is it?" cried Elinor.

"I just got kicked!" Frances laughed.

"By the little girl?"

"No," replied Frances. "By the other one."

. . .

Frances's labor pains began at the supper table a week to the day later. Though she wasn't finished, Miriam stood up and said, "I'm going home. Somebody call me when it's over." Queenie hurried away too, throwing congratulations over her shoulder. Billy ran toward the telephone to call Leo Benquith, but Frances stopped him with a sharp word.

"No!" she cried. "Mama and Zaddie. Just Mama and Zaddie."

"Sweetheart," said Billy in surprise, "you're so big, what if there's a problem?"

"Just Mama and Zaddie." Frances was firm.

"Elinor," said Oscar, alarmed, "take care of Frances, get her upstairs, quick."

"Oscar, it doesn't happen that quickly," said Elinor calmly.

"Are you all right?" asked Frances's husband solicitously.

"Zaddie," said Oscar, "leave the dishes be. You take care of Frances."

"She's all right, Mr. Oscar," replied Zaddie, and continued to clear the table.

"Or at least I will be," said Frances, "as soon as you two get out of here."

"Who?" said Billy. "Who is *you two?"*

"You and Daddy."

"What?" cried Oscar.

"I don't want you around here," said Frances.

"You make her nervous," explained Elinor. "I don't blame her. When I was giving birth, I certainly didn't want any men around. Men get in the way."

"That's right," said Frances. "So I would be much obliged, Billy, if you and Daddy would go off somewhere."

"Where would we go?" said Billy.

"Go out to Gavin Pond Farm and stay with Grace and Lucille for the night," said Elinor. "We'll call you when it's over."

"I'm not leaving!" said Billy.

"Yes, you are," said Frances calmly. "And right now. Put some pajamas in a paper bag. Mama, call up Grace and tell her to turn down the bed for Billy and Daddy."

Billy Bronze and Oscar Caskey sat in silent astonishment at the dining room table, watching as Elinor helped her daughter up the stairs.

Zaddie came in from the kitchen, and cried to the two men, “Shoo! Shoo! We don’t want y’all here!”

. . .

The July night was hot and fragrant. Lowering white clouds gathered up pinpoints of light from the earth and cast them back as a diffuse gray pall over Perdido. Billy Bronze with his father-in-law on the seat beside him drove recklessly out to the farm, as if his wife were *there* and had begged him to be at her side during the delivery of their child.

“Billy,” said Oscar in mild reproof, “you are going too fast. I don’t particularly want to die tonight. Not till I’ve seen my first little grandchild.”

“Sorry,” said Billy, and lifted his foot from the accelerator.

They drove through Babylon. It was only nine o’clock, but many of the houses were already shut up for the night.

Oscar said, “I tried to get Elinor to tell me whether it was gone be a boy or a girl, but she wouldn’t say. She said, ‘You and Billy got to wait and see.’”

“How would she know anyway?” asked Billy.

For a few seconds Oscar didn’t answer. Then he asked a question of his own: “How can you have been around Elinor as much as you have and not notice she knows things you and I don’t?”

“Miz Caskey’s smart as a whip,” agreed Billy. “But how would she know if it were going to be a boy or a girl?”

Lucille and Grace were expecting them, alerted by a telephone call from Elinor. They stood in the doorway to the farmhouse in identical housecoats.

“Y’all get thrown out?” said Grace with a smile.

“We sure did!” cried Billy, climbing out of the car.

“I know we’re disturbing you,” said Oscar with a shake of his head.

“Frances threw you out, I guess,” said Lucille, also smiling and standing aside so that the men could enter. “About time. How any self-respecting woman could live with a man, I will *never* know.”

“Hurts my feelings,” said Billy. “It really does.”

“I think I better call Elinor,” said Oscar, heading for the telephone.

“Don’t,” said Grace. “She told me to tell you *she’d* call. They wouldn’t answer it anyway, they’re all too busy to answer the telephone.”

“So we’re just going to sit here until the telephone rings,” said Billy with a sigh. “This is my first baby!”

“We are gone play cards to get your mind off things,” said Grace, leading the men into the dining room.

“I just play dominoes,” said Oscar. “If I had thought about it I would have brought them.”

“We’re gone teach you canasta,” said Lucille. “That’s what Grace and I always play. ’Course it’s different with four than it is with two, but that’s what rule books are for.”

The four sat down at the table, and Oscar was patiently told the rules. However, he couldn’t keep his mind on the game, and after about an hour they gave up trying to play. Lucille went into the kitchen and prepared glasses of Elinor’s blackberry nectar and brought it out to the dining room.

“Oscar, long as you are here,” Grace was saying, “I might as well tell you about something.”

“What’s that?”

“Miriam was out here last week with papers for me to sign.”

“I know she was.”

“Good. That’s all I wanted to know. I just wanted to make sure she wasn’t off rampaging on her own with all our property down there south of the farm.”

“Miriam says we’re gone make a fortune off it,” remarked Billy. “And Lord, if it can be done through hard work and sheer meanness, then Miriam is going to make us all rich.”

“I’d trust Miriam,” said Oscar, reassuring Grace. “If she says sign something, I’d go ahead and sign it. If she says, ‘Write me a check,’ then pull out your checkbook. She knows what she’s doing. Miriam doesn’t care about anything but making money, and it doesn’t matter to her if the money she makes goes into her account, or yours or mine or anybody else’s in the family. Nothing makes Miriam happier than adding up a column of figures every day, and seeing the total get higher and higher.”

“But doesn’t she talk to you about all this?” Grace asked incredulously.

“Why should she?” Oscar shrugged. “I know just about everything there is to know about trees, but not much about anything else. I certainly couldn’t go out to Texas and talk about oil in Escambia County, Florida, but Miriam could.”

“Would they listen to a woman?” asked Lucille.

“Maybe not,” put in Billy. “That’s why she’s taking me along with her. Just for insurance. I know *something* about all this—not as much as

Miriam, of course—but I'll sit there just looking smart, I guess, and she can do all the talking. I'll spread out the maps on somebody's desk, and Miriam can draw the little circles."

"My question is," said Grace, "how the hell does she know where to draw the little circles?"

Billy shrugged.

Oscar said: "Elinor showed her..."

Lines of inquiry in the Caskey family always stopped short at Elinor.

. . .

"Y'all," said Grace a short time later, "Lucille and I are gone have to go upstairs. You city people can lie abed until eight o'clock in the morning if you want to, but in the summertime Lucille and I have to be up at four."

"You go on," said Oscar, "and thank y'all for keeping us company."

"Did y'all bring pajamas?" asked Lucille.

"Out in the car," said Billy.

"And y'all don't mind sharing a bed for the night?" asked Grace.

"I was hoping Elinor would have called by now," sighed Oscar.

"Go to bed," said Grace. "Don't expect anything before morning."

"I know I'm not going to be able to sleep," said Billy. "I'm going to be waiting to hear the phone ring."

"Leave your door open," said Grace, now standing on the lowermost stair with her hand atop Lucille's on the newel post.

The two women went upstairs to bed. Downstairs, Oscar and Billy heard their door being softly pulled shut. They sat for another half hour at the dining room table talking quietly, then Billy went out to the car and fetched their pajamas. They went upstairs, undressed, and got into the bed.

"I'm not gone be able to sleep either," said Oscar. "I cain't sleep anywhere but in my own bed. This isn't a feather mattress. I got to have a feather mattress. Elinor should have put a feather mattress in the back of the car. If I ever have to go anywhere again, I'm gone put a feather mattress in the back so I can get to sleep."

"You really think," said Billy softly, turning on his pillow to face his father-in-law, lying wide-eyed beside him, "that Elinor knows whether it's gone be a boy or a girl?"

"Of course. And Frances does, too," said Oscar. "Billy, get up and turn on that window fan, will you? Maybe I can get to sleep if there's some air blowing over me."

Billy did so, then turned and stood at the foot of the bed. “Frances knows it, too?”

“I know it for a fact. Why you think they got rid of us?”

“’Cause they didn’t want us there.”

“That’s right,” said Oscar. “And when was the last time Frances told you to do something and wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Never.”

“That’s right.”

“What does this all mean?” asked Billy, perplexed.

“It means,” said Oscar, “that they know something they don’t want us to find out.”

Billy went around and got into the bed again. “Yes,” he hissed, “but what is it?”

“Billy,” said Oscar, “are you gone keep me awake all night, talking?”

. . .

As he’d predicted, Oscar couldn’t get to sleep because he wasn’t sleeping on a feather mattress. Beside him in the bed, Billy Bronze didn’t sleep because he was worried about his wife and anxious to know of the birth of his child. Across the hall, Lucille and Grace tossed and turned because they had both had too much coffee after dinner. On his cot at the foot of their bed, Tommy Lee Burgess tossed and turned because of the heat and the wasp that buzzed around up near the ceiling.

In Perdido, Sister sat bolt upright in bed among her pillows. The bedside light was on and she was leafing impatiently through a large stack of magazines, feverishly clipping out recipes. In the darkness at the other end of the room, Miriam sat backward in a chair. Her arms were crossed on a little wicker table and she patiently turned the knob of the radio, searching out the late-night stations.

It was the heat, the worry, the mattress, the suspense, the insects, the caffeine, and the smell of the river in the air that kept them all awake.

Hearing a sudden sharp sound, Sister’s head snapped up from the magazine she was flipping through. “What was that?”

Miriam stood up and went over to the window. She peered out through the screen, and saw the single lighted window in her parents’ home.

“That was Frances,” she said. “She’s still in labor, I guess.”

“I think they ought to get Leo Benquith over there this very minute.”

“Leo’s so old,” stated Miriam impassively. “If I were having a baby, you know who’d I want to be there?”

“Who?”

“Elinor and Zaddie,” replied Miriam, sitting down again and once more turning the radio dial.

“You’ll never have a baby,” said Sister with a shrug.

. . .

A single light on the vanity burned in Frances’s room. Elinor lay next to her daughter on the bed, holding both her hands. Frances’s hair was lank and wet on the pillowcase. She stared vacantly at the ceiling. Zaddie sat in a slim mahogany rocker at the foot of the bed.

“Coming time,” remarked Zaddie.

Elinor nodded. “Is everything ready?”

Frances twitched. The sheets were damp with her perspiration. All the covers had been pulled down and lay draped over the foot of the bed. Elinor grasped her daughter’s hands more tightly. Frances began to groan, and attempted to turn over on her side. But Elinor’s hold didn’t allow that, and Frances began to squirm.

Zaddie stood up, ready to proffer assistance. Frances grew quiet again.

“Miss Elinor, is she gone be all right?” Zaddie asked. “She looks bad.”

“She’s worried.”

“Ever’body worries with their first.”

Elinor nodded and looked at her daughter. Frances’s eyes were vacant, her mouth slack.

“I ’member Miss Frances being born,” mused Zaddie.

“You remember something else?” asked Elinor pointedly.

“Ma’am?”

“You remember what I did on the night Frances was born?”

Zaddie shook her head slowly.

“Yes, you do, Zaddie,” said Elinor. “Don’t tell me you don’t.”

“Miss Elinor,” said Zaddie, “I have grown up in this house. I have never lived anywhere else. I am gone grow old here, I guess. I have never got married. I have never had anything to do with colored men, ’cause I belong to you.”

“You’re mine,” Elinor assented.

“And living in this house,” said Zaddie, “I’ve seen things and I’ve heard things. But that don’t mean I pay much attention. All I know is I

belong to you, and I'm gone grow old here waiting on you and yours."

"Good," said Elinor. "And you know what that means?"

"Ma'am?"

"It means you're not going to be running off tonight, no matter what happens and no matter what you see. You're—"

Frances suddenly lurched up in the bed and screamed.

With one stroke of her arm, Elinor pressed her daughter back down on the wet sheets. She lifted up Frances's nightdress above her enormously distended and now rumbling belly.

"That's it!" hissed Zaddie. "Here he comes."

"She," corrected Elinor, rubbing the tips of her fingers over the wet shining globe being excreted from between Frances's legs.

Frances screamed and shook, while Zaddie held both her writhing hands.

In a minute, the baby's shoulders were exposed. Elinor took it in her hands and gently helped it along. In only a little more time, the child was free. Elinor quickly severed the umbilical cord and cried, "Here, Zaddie, take her."

Frances continued to thrash, and Zaddie, with fearful eyes, said, "Lord God, there's another."

"Take the baby," Elinor insisted.

Zaddie let go of Frances's hands. Her arms dropped like leaden weights on the bed. She thrashed no longer. Zaddie picked up a towel and took the child from Elinor.

"Turn out the light!" commanded Elinor.

Zaddie stood stock-still, holding the miry female infant in her arms. "You cain't see a thing with the lights out!"

"Turn out the light!" Elinor repeated hastily. "Now!"

Zaddie turned to do so, but as she was turning she glimpsed a second head emerging smoothly from Frances's quietly heaving body. It was greenish-gray, and it seemed to wobble. Zaddie saw two wide-open, perfectly round filmy eyes, and two round black holes where a nose ought to have been before her fingers touched the switch on the lamp and the room was plunged into darkness.

Clutching the newborn girl, Zaddie stood and listened. She heard a sound from the bed; it was like that of a man's boot being slowly lifted up out of a pool of mire. Next Zaddie heard a scrambling sound, followed by a

hard breath or two from Elinor, then the sharp clack of scissors. In a few seconds, Elinor said, “Turn on the light.”

Zaddie fumbled for the lamp, knocked it over in her haste, then righted it and turned the light on.

Frances lay limp, exhausted, but smiling. Elinor stood at the foot of the bed cradling the second child. A towel concealed it from Zaddie’s sight.

Frances reached out to Zaddie for her little girl.

“Ten fingers,” said Elinor. “Ten toes on your little girl.”

Zaddie, handing over the baby to Frances, stepped toward Elinor. Elinor withdrew.

“Is it alive?” Zaddie whispered.

The towel twitched and squirmed so violently that Elinor very nearly dropped it. She peeked under the flap, and laughed.

“Mama,” said Frances, “let me see.”

Elinor glanced at Zaddie. “Go wash the baby off,” Elinor said to the black woman. “In the bathroom—and close the door behind you.”

Zaddie took back the female infant and carried it into the bathroom. She flicked on the light and turned to close the door. She saw Elinor go around the bed and hold out the toweled bundle to Frances. As Zaddie pulled the door shut, she heard yet one more scream from Frances. This time it was not a cry of physical pain, but one of shock and dismay.

. . .

“No,” said Elinor sternly to her daughter. “Don’t turn your face away. Go on and look at her.”

“Her?” questioned Frances, shrinking back deeper into the damp pillows.

“Two little girls,” said Elinor quietly. “Twins.”

“Mama, you cain’t call that thing you’ve got—”

“Take her, darling, and hold her for a minute.”

“I cain’t!”

“Yes, you can,” said Elinor, pressing the towel-wrapped bundle on Frances. A piece of the towel fell back, and Frances saw two moist flat eyes, the size of half-dollars, staring out at her. Frances, refusing to reach out her arms, simply shook her head no.

“Lord,” laughed Elinor, “what do you think *you* looked like?”

Frances looked up in amazement. “When I was born?”

“No, but a little later. When I took you down to the river to baptize you. Before the levee was built.” Elinor hugged her second granddaughter close with the happy memory. “Zaddie followed me down there in the middle of the night because she didn’t know *what* I was going to do with you. She saw me throw you in the water—”

“You threw me in the river!”

“Of course. And then Zaddie waded right out there, and she picked you up. Except you didn’t look like Frances Caskey that got born that morning, you looked like *this.”*

With that Elinor pulled the towel away, and before her daughter could protest, thrust the second child into Frances’s unwilling arms.

Frances grimaced and shivered and tried to hand it back, but Elinor stepped out of reach. “You be careful,” Elinor said, “she’s slippery.”

For a moment Frances looked as if she were about to throw the thing from her, but then it made a little swollen cry, rather like that of a kitten fallen into a pail of rainwater. Instinctively, Frances pressed it to her breast. The damp-sounding mewling continued.

“What’s wrong with her?” Frances asked. “Why is she crying like this?”

“She’s drowning,” said Elinor.

“Drowning?!”

“In the air. She needs to be in water.”

“Is she gone die?” Frances asked with a tremor in her voice.

Elinor shook her head. “All I have to do is take her down to the river and throw her in. She’ll be all right.”

“Who’ll take care of her?”

At first Elinor didn’t answer. “She’ll be all right,” is all Elinor finally said.

“Mama, are you sure?”

“I thought you didn’t want her.”

“Well,” said Frances, who still held the changeling infant against her breast so she would not have to look at it directly, “I don’t want Billy to see her, or even Zaddie—” She glanced nervously at the bathroom door, as if she had forgot that Zaddie and her first little girl were on the other side of it.

“Zaddie won’t come out till I tell her to,” said Elinor reassuringly.

“—but I certainly don’t want her to die.”

“Look at her, darling.”

A single tear formed in the corner of Frances's eye. "Mama, I cain't."

"Hold her out in front of you," said Elinor, "and see what your little girl looks like. This is the happiest moment in a mother's life."

Frances did so, reluctantly.

Her daughter squirmed.

"Mama," said Frances tremorously, "it's the ugliest thing I ever saw in my life."

"Sweetheart!" laughed Elinor. "One of these days I'm going to walk up to the top of the levee and throw a hand mirror into the Perdido."

"Why?"

"So you can see what *you* look like under the water."

Frances returned her gaze to her second daughter, and it was with new eyes that she beheld the infant that writhed vigorously before her.

Chapter 64

Billy's Family

Zaddie sat for an hour with the newborn infant in the bathroom adjacent to Frances's room; she knew better than to come out before she was called. Years spent with Elinor Caskey had dampened her curiosity about things she wasn't told directly. After a long while of sitting patiently on the edge of the bathtub with the newborn infant in her lap, she at last heard a single rap on the door. She got up and opened it. Elinor, still with the towel-wrapped bundle, was moving across the room to the far side of the bed. In the middle of the bed was a large circle of gore, water, some grayish-green slime the likes of which Zaddie had never seen before, and two umbilical cords—one of them bloody and fleshy and like every other umbilical cord, and the other smooth and gray and not bloody at all.

Frances, still naked but having toweled away most of the evidence of the double birth, was seated at the vanity and brushing her hair. Her motions were weak and somewhat disjointed. She was pale and her expression was wan. But she sat straight, as if to give the impression of quickly returning strength. Zaddie carried the infant over for Frances to look at.

"See how pretty!" cried Zaddie.

Frances looked at the baby, and smiled absently.

"Zaddie," said Elinor, "Frances and I have to go out for a few minutes."

"Ma'am!" cried Zaddie, in acute astonishment.

Frances stood up carefully from the vanity. "Lord, I feel so *empty!"* she laughed, stepping to the closet and removing a light robe from it. "I keep looking down and wondering where all of me went."

Zaddie, remembering another time long ago, said, "Miss Elinor, you gone be careful with this baby now?"

"That baby stays here, Zaddie."

Zaddie appeared much relieved. She stared at the bundle in Elinor's arms and said, "It's a terrible thing, Miss Frances, when a baby is born dead."

The blanket in Elinor's arms twitched, but if Zaddie saw the motion, she made no sign. She had decided that the second child born of Frances

Caskey had been born dead. And she thought, considering what she had seen of it emerging from Frances's straining body, that that was just as well. If it was still alive, Miss Elinor and Miss Frances couldn't do better than to throw it in the river, and Zaddie herself might just as well keep her mouth shut.

Frances slipped on a pair of sandals, and said, "Mama, I'm ready."

"Miss Frances!" cried Zaddie. "You not thinking of going *out!"*

"There's no need for you to go, darling," said Elinor. "You can stay here. Call Billy and Oscar if you want. I'll be back long before they get here."

"Mama," said Frances, "I want to go with you. After all," she said, glancing down at the fouled bed, "she's my little girl. My *other* little girl."

In an attempt to ignore this conversation, Zaddie absorbed herself with the child in her arms, caressing the infant softly and crooning a little wordless tune.

"Zaddie?" said Elinor.

"Ma'am?"

"You know what to say if anybody asks, don't you?"

"I'm gone say Miss Frances had the prettiest little baby girl anybody ever did see in their life."

"And that's all," said Elinor.

"What else is there to say?" returned Zaddie, unperturbed.

"Nothing," said Frances, tickling her first infant under the chin. "Nothing else..."

"We're going out for a few minutes, then," said Elinor. "Don't answer the telephone if it rings, and don't turn on any other lights. I wouldn't be surprised if Sister wasn't watching out her window, and if she sees lights coming on all over the house, she'll probably pick up the telephone and call Oscar."

"I put two mattress pads under here," said Zaddie with pride, pointing at the bed. "Not nothing got through, but if Mr. Billy comes back tonight, don't y'all sleep in here. Y'all sleep somewhere else, and let me come in here tomorrow and scrub this place down. Smells like that old river in here, sure do. Miss Frances, you be careful out there. Don't trip on nothing. Sure do wish you'd stay here with me. What would people think if they knew you were traipsing around outside right after you had a little baby girl?"

“I’ll be all right, Zaddie,” Frances assured her. “Mama’s gone lead me, and she’ll walk real slow. I’m gone be careful, I promise.”

. . .

It was past midnight. Leaving her first infant in Zaddie’s care, and taking the second from Elinor, Frances went slowly down the stairs of the darkened house. Elinor had gone first to open doors and make sure no furniture was in their path. “I can see perfectly fine,” said Frances.

They went quietly out the back door and ceased speaking. The lights in Sister’s room were burning, and they had no desire to draw her curiosity with their voices.

Under cover of the water oaks, Elinor and Frances walked slowly along the base of the levee until they came to the concrete steps behind Queenie’s house. They started up the steps slowly and carefully, but Frances quickly became winded and more than once almost cried out in sharp pain. She didn’t stop, however, and soon they were at the top, hidden by the thick stands of saplings that had taken root there. The Perdido flowed swiftly below; its voice and its smell in that still night were achingly familiar—and comforting—to Frances.

“Well?” said Elinor after a short time.

“Mama,” whispered Frances, peering at her daughter, whose half-dollar eyes glistened moistly, “am I supposed to just throw her in? From way up here?”

“No,” said Elinor. “I’ll take her down and put her in.”

“You sure she’ll be all right?”

“Darling,” said Elinor, caressing the infant in Frances’s arms, “do you really think I’d deliberately kill this sweet, sweet thing? See, she’s not ugly to me, not ugly one little bit!” Elinor playfully poked a finger into the lipless mouth and twisted the swollen black tongue. “Not one little bit!”

“But who’ll take care of her?”

Elinor took the child, and tossed aside the towel in which she had been wrapped.

“Are there others down there?” asked Frances. “Somebody else who’ll make sure she gets enough to eat?”

Without answering, Elinor, with the help of one sapling trunk after another, began slipping down the slope of the levee toward the river.

After a moment of indecision, Frances followed, though the pain in her groin beat with the pulse of her heart.

“What *does* she eat?” Frances whispered loudly, but still Elinor did not answer.

Frances tripped over a blackberry bush, scratching her right arm and leg.

“Frances!” cried Elinor, stopping her downward progress.

“I’m all right, Mama,” cried Frances a moment later in a strained voice. She picked herself up painfully.

When Elinor reached the base of the levee, she reached out an arm. In a moment Frances had slipped down the last few feet of levee and grabbed her mother’s hand. Elinor squeezed.

“Catch your breath,” she said.

“How am I gone get back up?” sighed Frances.

“You shouldn’t have come down here.”

“Mama, that’s my baby.”

“I’m glad you said that,” said Elinor with pride. “’Cause she *is* yours.”

They stood on a sandbar. Crickets chirped in the kudzu vine all around them. When Frances’s breath had grown even once again, Elinor took a step forward into the water. Frances, shedding her robe, held her mother’s hand and followed.

“Give her to me,” said Frances.

Elinor relinquished the infant to Frances.

Together, mother and daughter walked forward into the swiftly flowing dark water.

. . .

For two hours Zaddie Sapp sat in the mahogany rocker in Frances’s room holding the newborn infant. She rocked patiently, waiting for the return of Elinor and Frances and tried as best she could not to think of that second child, that other twin, the child who had been born deformed, and who was now dead. Zaddie trusted and loved Miss Elinor, and whatever Miss Elinor did was right and not to be questioned.

The telephone rang twice, but Zaddie did not answer it.

Sometime after three o’clock, Elinor and Frances returned. Both wore only robes, and their hair was tangled and wet.

“How is she doing?” whispered Frances, poking at the child in Zaddie’s arms.

“She’s hungry,” replied Zaddie.

“Let me have her then,” whispered Frances. She took the child from Zaddie and then lay down on the bed, opened her robe, and put the child to her breast.

“Mama,” said Frances, looking up at Elinor, who stood in the doorway brushing tangles out of her wet hair, “maybe you ought to go and call Billy and Daddy.”

Elinor nodded, and went across the hall to telephone. In a moment Frances and Zaddie heard her talking in a low voice. “Zaddie,” said Frances, “Mama and I left tracks all through the house. You better see what you can do to clean them up before Billy and Daddy get back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Zaddie?” said Frances.

“Ma’am?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Zaddie turned to go, but at the door she was stopped by one more word from Frances. The black woman turned back.

“Don’t worry about the other one,” said Frances. “She’s doing fine.”

. . .

Billy and Oscar were home by four that morning, but neither of them went to sleep. Billy sat in the mahogany rocker and held his daughter, and Oscar and Elinor sat on the upstairs porch talking. Frances, wholly exhausted, slept the sleep of the dead. Queenie came over at five, announcing that she couldn’t sleep and wanted to see the baby. Miriam arrived at six, saying that their voices had kept her up all night and that somebody ought to take the baby over and show her to Sister before Sister had a stroke.

Much later in the morning, Frances did take her daughter next door and exhibited her to Sister, who cooed and made much of the infant.

“I always wanted me a baby girl,” sighed Sister. “What are you calling this one?”

“We’ve decided on Lilah,” said Frances.

“I sure wish you had an extra that you could send over here to keep me company.”

At this Frances began to laugh, and Sister said, “What, may I ask, is so funny about that?”

Frances only laughed more loudly.

Lilah was duly examined by Leo Benquith, who pronounced her fine and perfect. He deprecated Frances's decision to have the child at home—so many women were having their babies in hospitals now, and it was a good thing so far as he was concerned. Frances hadn't even called in a midwife, and *anything* might have happened.

"Mama was there," returned Frances. "Zaddie was there. And everything worked out fine."

. . .

Billy Bronze noted an abrupt change in Frances after the birth of their child. In that single night—during the hours in which he had been banished from the house—she seemed to have grown up, to have come instantly into the Caskey women's legacy of imperiousness and self-sufficiency. She wasn't belligerent or demanding, of course; Frances could never be *that*. But now she knew what she wanted, and she wasn't afraid to ask for it. Previously, she had demurred to any opinion or wish contrary to her own; now she considered her own desires to be equal to anyone's. And she didn't cling as she once did. She said to Billy, "Maybe you ought to get yourself a real secretary down at your office. It's gone be hard for me to get away every day and leave my little girl at home with Zaddie. Zaddie's got enough to do."

Billy agreed with this, and hired a girl just out of high school who had got all A's in her typing and accounting courses. She proved to be of much greater use to Billy than Frances, whose principal worth had been in her loyalty and her readiness to attempt any task rather than in her secretarial abilities.

. . .

Billy liked this improvement at the office. He really had been in need of more efficient assistance in his job of handling the Caskey personal finances. Miriam was running more and more of the mill's business, with her father relinquishing bits of his power every day. Under Miriam's stringent management, the mill prospered as it never had before, even during the height of the war.

Miriam sought out contracts in a way that her father never had. She hired salesmen from Pensacola and Mobile to go out and solicit lumber business. She talked with major builders in the Florida and Alabama panhandles and offered them large discounts for volume orders. She had bought new improved machinery in order to speed production. She had a

man who did nothing but look around the place and see that everything was being done correctly. She hired a firm of Atlanta accountants to do taxes and to advise her on how things should be done so as to minimize the mill's liability to the government. She drove out into the country and bargained with dying farmers and the widows of dead farmers for the purchase of their land. It was said that she went to more funerals than anybody else in the county. Miriam was tireless, and more and more money poured into the Caskey coffers.

Billy invested this newly made capital. After Miriam's needs at the mill were taken care of, Billy worked out schemes with bonds, stocks, and personal loans that were bewildering to family members who occasionally asked such questions as: "Well, Billy, what have you been doing with our money lately?" He had a special telephone line put in to brokers in New Orleans, Atlanta, and New York. He kept a junior high school boy sitting against the wall in the hallway outside his office whose sole job was to take telegraph messages down to Mr. Jett, who operated the Western Union franchise out of the stockroom of the Ben Franklin store.

Billy prepared envelopes with crisp new notes for every member of the family every week; he wrote checks for all the bills that came in; and once a month he prepared a typewritten account showing how much everyone was worth. This single sheet was always a source of astonishment to the Caskeys. Queenie once said to Billy, "Why don't you ever come down hard on us for spending money the way we do? I know I don't think anything of going down to Pensacola, and *buying out* those dress shops!"

Billy laughed and replied, "Well, Queenie, you're worth so damned much that you'd have to go down to Pensacola every day for two years and just *spend* from eight o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, and then maybe I'd have to say, 'Hey, Queenie, ease up...' But not until then."

Queenie loved hearing this. How little, in her earlier life, had she ever imagined a day when she would actually have more money than she would know how to spend.

. . .

The Caskeys all eventually learned that Miriam intended to drill for oil on the swampland below Gavin Pond Farm. Queenie and Sister agreed that it was all foolishness, that they had enough money as it was, and that Lucille and Grace and Tommy Lee might be greatly upset at having such an operation so close to their home. Grace herself had become reconciled to

the idea by Lucille's pointing out, on every occasion the subject was brought up, that if there was oil under that swamp, then she and Lucille would become the richest farmers in Escambia County, Florida. They could buy ten bulls with unexceptionable pedigrees, they could clear a thousand more acres for soybeans and cotton and corn and peanuts. They could buy half a dozen tractors and put up new barns and dig out a second pond, and add an L to the farmhouse. Grace was so excited that she called Miriam up, and said, "When are you going to get on with this business? Lucille and I cain't wait around forever for this money that's gone come to us."

Miriam hired surveyors and geologists from the University of Texas and brought them to Perdido. They were fed at Elinor's house and then taken out to Gavin Pond Farm, where they were introduced to Grace and then let loose in the swamp with their instruments, lenses, and logbooks.

Their report was about what Miriam expected it would be: conditions in the swampland were consistent with the possibility of large reserves of oil below.

With this ammunition Miriam was prepared to take on Houston.

After Miriam had formally asked Billy to accompany her on the trip, Billy said to Frances, "Do you mind if I go with Miriam?"

"Of course not," said Frances. "She may need you out there. Though that's a bit hard to imagine, knowing Miriam."

Miriam and Billy made appointments to visit a number of oil companies during the ten days that they were to be in Houston. Miriam planned to show them the maps and the surveyors' and the geologists' reports and then ask, in effect, "What next?"

One hot August afternoon, while Miriam was sitting across from him in his office, Billy ventured to say to Miriam, "Are you sure this is the way things are usually done in the oil business?"

"No," returned Miriam, unperturbed, "but it's the way I'm gone do it."

"What if they laugh in your face? I mean, who's *not* going to laugh when you tell them that they ought to drill for oil in Florida? Whoever heard of oil in Florida before? Aren't they going to say, 'Watch out for the alligators!'?"

"They might," said Miriam. "But in two years I'll be the one who's laughing."

"How can you be so sure of yourself?" asked Billy.

“Because,” said Miriam, thoughtfully, “when it comes down to it, I trust what Elinor says, and she says there’s oil down there.”

Billy smiled and looked askance at this. One of his trousers’ legs was caught in the fan beneath his desk and he reached down to free it. His cuffs were always frayed from being caught so often. When he looked up, Miriam was slowly moving about the office with a rolled-up financial journal, stalking a wasp that had flown in the window.

“How does Miz Caskey know anything about whether there’s oil under that land?” Billy asked.

“How the hell should I know?” said Miriam as she deftly swatted the wasp. When it dropped dazed to the floor, she crushed it with her shoe and kicked the carcass beneath a bookcase. “But I’m convinced she *does* and that’s what matters. Elinor may have given me away when I was a baby. She may never have loved me one-tenth of how much she loves Frances. She may not even love me as much as she loves *you*, Billy. But Elinor doesn’t lie to me. That’s one thing I can say for her. If Elinor pulls me behind a curtain and tells me there’s oil under the swamp, then I’m gone row out there with a pump in the back of my boat.”

“I think you’re taking a chance,” said Billy.

“I don’t care what you think,” said Miriam off-handedly. “I just need to know if you’ll go to Houston with me.”

“Of course, I’ll go. I’ve already told you I would.”

Miriam sat down again and unrolled the journal she had swatted the wasp with. “I wonder if we shouldn’t pretend we’re married and that you’re the one who’s really in charge.”

Billy laughed. “Nobody would believe *that* for a minute.”

“I guess not,” said Miriam, with complacency.

Chapter 65

Silver

Although Frances raised no objection to Billy's going off to Texas, Sister was furious with Miriam for planning such a trip. She claimed she was being "deserted," left alone to the wolves and starvation, and rendered defenseless prey to thieves, rapists, and perhaps even her husband.

Miriam listened to Sister's ravings from the next room as she packed. Queenie sat at the side of Sister's bed, patiently taping Sister's clipped recipes to file cards, even though she knew that these dishes would never be prepared.

When Sister's voice had finally given out and Miriam had snapped her bags shut, Miriam entered Sister's room and said, "Queenie is gone take care of you just the same as always, Sister. And Ivey is gone sleep here at night so you won't be alone. You have a telephone on your bedside table and you can call anybody in the world to come and help you if you think you need help."

"Say goodbye to me now, Miriam, 'cause I won't be alive when you get back," returned Sister in a doleful voice.

Sister's accusations and predictions did not deter Miriam one inch from her long-laid plans. "Sister," Miriam said, "you are getting more and more like Grandmama every day."

"I am not!"

"I never thought I'd see it," mused Miriam to Queenie.

Thereafter, Sister voiced no more objections to Miriam's trip to Texas.

Billy and Miriam drove off one Sunday afternoon early in September, with an appointment at the American Oil Company in Houston on Tuesday morning. The Caskeys, still in their Sunday clothes, sat on the screened porch at Elinor's and, with the fragrance of Miriam's soap still lingering in the air, said how lonesome they were already. Oscar stood and yelled out to Sister, dimly visible through the window of her bedroom next door, "Let Bray and Queenie bring you over here, Sister."

"It'd kill me, Oscar! At least have the decency to let me rot in peace!" Sister yelled back.

In the first few days of Miriam's absence, Sister sulked. At times she even sent Queenie away.

One evening Sister had lain alone in her room, leafing through her magazines as usual looking for recipes, clipping them out, arranging them on the bedspread into full-fledged wedding dinners, champagne breakfasts —Sister had never tasted champagne—and country brunches. She avidly read a twenty-year-old copy of Emily Post's *Etiquette*, wondering at *so* much silver to be used for a late breakfast, and so much *other* silver to be used at tea, and the number of glasses for dinner. At ten o'clock she telephoned Queenie and demanded querulously, "What happened to all James's silver?"

"It's right here," said Queenie. "Nothing's happened to it."

"Bring it over here and let me see it."

"Lord, Sister," cried Queenie, "you know how much of that stuff there is! You send me a couple of wheelbarrows, and I'll send them back loaded down."

"Bring me a case or two over here."

Queenie didn't argue. She couldn't *begin* to think of a reason why Sister would want any of James's silver, yet obediently she went to the pantry where some of it was kept and took out two heavy mahogany boxes. One contained a sterling flatware set for twelve, engraved with a "C." In the other was a jumbled array of serving pieces of various design; many of them were antique, and many had been made for such an obscure purpose that Queenie was sometimes at a loss which end to pick up.

Holding the two boxes in her encircling arms, Queenie kicked at the frame of the hooked screen door at Sister's. After a few moments Ivey was roused out of the bed that had been set up for her in the corner of the dining room. She unhooked the door, stared at Queenie, and mumbled, "She sure is running you ragged."

"Go back to bed," said Queenie. "Good-night."

She went upstairs with the silver and laid the boxes on the side of Sister's bed.

"There's more over there, isn't there?" said Sister anxiously.

Queenie nodded. "A lot more."

"Good," said Sister. "Go home now. Go to bed. Thank you."

Sister lay back on the pillows and listened closely to the progress of Queenie's footsteps through the house. When she heard the screen door

slam shut, she sat up and greedily spilled out the contents of the boxes over her injured leg.

For an hour, Sister picked up the pieces of silver one by one, examined each for marks and initials and scratches, and then placed them carefully back in their boxes. In her mind's eye, Sister feverishly saw a large country estate—a much-improved Gavin Pond Farm, actually—and the weekend parties she would herself give. She imagined well-dressed strangers and innocent flirtations and little misunderstandings that eventually came right. She pictured champagne bottles in silver coolers and four meals a day, each on a different tablecloth with different silver, different china, different crystal, and different cut flowers. She thought of varieties of place cards and mixed drinks served by a clear blue swimming pool and children locked away under the eye of a crisp-aproned nurse. Elinor was there, looking just as she looked now, and Queenie had a little out-of-the-way corner in the second parlor. Miriam had an office that overlooked the swimming pool, and Frances and Billy lived somewhere else but they drove up every day in the biggest car anybody had ever seen. Lucille and Grace and Tommy Lee had a small cottage out on the grounds, just visible through the trees, and wore wide-brimmed sun hats and flowered dresses, and didn't show up until five o'clock when they walked around and apologized and shook hands with everybody. Among them all stood Sister herself, cool and detached and smiling, seemingly everywhere at once, greeting her guests, checking with Ivey and Zaddie and Roxie in the kitchen, telling Bray what to do about the garden now. Then she would drop elegantly into a soft chair in the corner for a few seconds to catch her breath between so many exigencies of sociability. Early Haskew was part of the picture, too. He was out by the big iron gate, grasping the bars with white-knuckled hands and aching to get in. The big cars blew their horns at him as they approached and he had to move aside to let them pass. The gates were clanged shut before he could gain entrance.

Now the last piece of silver had gone back into its box. Wondering whether she should empty them all out again and start over or whether she ought to turn out the light and try to sleep for a few hours, she looked up. Early Haskew stood framed in the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

Sister closed her eyes and fell back on her pillow, praying for the barred gates to swing shut in Early's face.

She opened her eyes and Early stepped into the room.

"How did you get in here?" demanded Sister tremulously.

The lids of both boxes banged shut.

"The door was unhooked downstairs. Anybody could have gotten in," said Early casually as he sat down. Early was nearly fifty-five years old, vast and coarse, with skin burned many times by many suns. It was brown and creased like the leather of an old boot one finds at the back of a closet. His red, watery eyes were sunk deep into his head. The teeth he had left were chipped and blackened. He brought in with him the smell of red dust, which was visible on his trouser cuffs, and the red powder had sifted over his boots. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up over his arms, and the undershirt beneath it was grimy with sweat.

"Why'd you come here?"

"I've been living in Mobile," returned Early. "Didn't you know that?"

"No! How would I know that?"

"You might have read the letters I wrote. You might even have answered one or two of 'em."

"Hard for me to write," said Sister, "confined as I am to this bed."

"I came up here," said Early, rocking contentedly, "to see if you were well yet."

"Do I look well? Do I look as if I have been out of this bed since the day I fell down those stairs out there?"

"You look fine to me," said Early.

"I'm not fine," snapped Sister. "I'm waited on hand and foot. I've got people running in and out of here all day, waiting on me and doing my bidding. I'm trapped in this bed."

"I bet you could walk if you tried."

"I could not."

"I spoke to your doctors in Pensacola. They all said you should be just fine by now."

"What do they know?"

"They're doctors." Early shrugged. "They know about what doctors are supposed to know, I guess."

Sister glanced at the clock. "It's one o'clock in the morning. What are you doing walking in somebody's house at one o'clock in the morning?"

"Got lonesome down in Mobile, Sister. Thought I'd come up to Perdido and visit with you a spell."

“I think you can turn around and drive right back to Mobile. I think you don’t even have to stop in Mobile, but can drive on straight through as far as I’m concerned.”

Early continued to rock, and said nothing.

Sister screeched out Ivey’s name, again and again.

After a bit, Ivey in her vast nightdress appeared in the doorway.

“Hey, Ivey, how you?” said Early.

“Hey, Mr. Early,” replied Ivey.

“Call the police,” said Sister. “Tell them to come get this man.”

“Don’t do it, Ivey,” said Early quietly.

“No, sir,” said Ivey, starting to retreat into the darkness of the hallway. “All this not none of my business.”

“I’ll get rid of you, Ivey,” Sister threatened.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sister crossed her arms and squeezed them tight, staring at her husband.

“I’m gone call the police,” said Sister calmly.

“And tell them what?” said Early. “That your husband came to visit you and walked in a door that was wide open to the world?”

Sister didn’t pick up the telephone.

“Why you treat me like this?” Early asked curiously. “Why you so mean to me, Sister? You weren’t always mean. Now you acting more like your mama than anything else.”

“I’m *not* like Mama,” protested Sister, “not a bit like her.” She began to weep. *“Mama* would never cry,” Sister maintained through her tears.

Early made no move.

“I get so lonesome,” he said. “I miss you. I even miss my old mama. I got me a dog, but he was run down in the road. I thought I’d get me another, but then I figured he’d get run down too, so I didn’t. I got plenty of money. Most people don’t have any idea how much money I have. I don’t spend it, though. I just put it in the bank, ’cause I don’t have anything I want to spend it on. I bought me a house, a little old house, and I got a woman to come in and cook for me. Oh, Sister, she’s a good cook. Not as good as Ivey, but she’s good. I got a little back yard and it’s overrun with day lilies. Not a blade of grass, all day lilies. You ought to have seen that place in May. You never saw so much orange and yellow in your life. I don’t even have to work if I don’t want to. I had a bridge built down at Bayou la Batre

and I ate me a mess of shrimp. Went out on one of them shrimp boats one day and sat and drank beer and ate shrimp the whole damn day. Kept thinking: 'I sure do wish that when I went back home Sister'd be there. I sure do wish I had some company in the evening.'"

Sister wiped her eyes on the hem of the sheet and sank lower in the bed.

"Few years from now I'm gone be sixty. Lord, that used to seem old to me. But it don't anymore. Used to wish you and I had some children, but we never did. Sometimes I think, 'Sister's dead.' And then I think, 'No, she just don't want to see me no more.' So I thought I'd come up here and ask you, 'Sister, are you ever gone come back and take care of me?'"

"No," said Sister, in a small, weary voice. "Not on your life."

"I could make you," remarked Early.

"You could throw me over your shoulder, if that's what you mean," said Sister. "You could tie me up in the back seat of your car. You could rope me to the bedposts at your house down in Mobile. You could beat me with day lilies till I was black and blue. But no matter what you did I wouldn't raise a finger to take care of you."

"Why not? What have you got against me?"

"Nothing," said Sister quickly. "I just don't want to be married."

"What changed your mind?"

"Nothing."

"Something."

"When Mama died," said Sister dreamily, distantly, "and you were off, I changed my mind. I said to myself, 'Lord, why on earth did you ever get married, Sister?' And I couldn't think of one good reason."

"I know why," said Early.

"Why?"

"You married me in the first place 'cause of Miss Mary-Love, so you could lord it over her that you had a husband and so you could obey me instead of her. When Miss Mary-Love was dead, you didn't need me anymore 'cause there wasn't anybody to lord it over."

Sister had no reply to this.

"I helped you out then," continued Early. "You ought to be willing to help me out now."

"Well, I'm not," said Sister. "I'm old and crippled."

"You could walk if you wanted to."

Sister shook her head. “I’m in this bed for the rest of my life, Early.”

“I bet when nobody’s around you get up and wander all over this house with the lights off so nobody can see in.”

“I don’t!”

Early rose. “Sister,” he said, “if I ever hear of you setting one foot out of this bed—if I ever read in the newspaper that your feet have touched this floor—I’m coming up here after you. You understand me? You stay here. You stay in this room and you rot, and don’t never let me hear of you putting on a pair of shoes again.”

“Early, open that closet door.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Early opened the closet door. On the inside, hung in pocketed mats, were two dozen pairs of Sister’s shoes.

“See those shoe bags?” said Sister, pointing.

Early nodded.

“Take ’em away,” commanded Sister. “’Cause I’m sure never gone wear ’em again.”

Early lifted the shoe bags from their hooks and laid them out on the floor. Some of the shoes were jarred from their pockets but Early carefully replaced them. Then he rolled up the bags, shoved them under his arm, and walked out the door.

“Ivey! Ivey!” Sister screamed. “Lock that door behind him!”

Chapter 66

Nerita

"Elinor," said Oscar, as he climbed into bed one night shortly after Miriam and Billy had left for Texas, "our baby is grieving."

"Frances?"

"She is pining for her husband, I believe."

"Probably," said Elinor thoughtfully.

"Haven't you noticed it? She is off in another world sometimes."

"I have noticed," admitted Elinor, slipping into bed beside Oscar.

"Do you think you should speak to her?"

"And say what?" asked Elinor.

"Oh," said Oscar vaguely, "you could tell her that Billy is coming back."

"She knows *that."*

"You don't think she imagines..."

"Imagines what, Oscar?"

"Imagines that Billy and Miriam are carrying on or anything."

Elinor slapped the back of her hand across her husband's chest. "Oscar!" she protested. "What a thing to say."

"You never know what a wife might start to think when her husband drives off to Texas with another woman."

"We're talking about *Billy.* And *Miriam*, of all people."

"I know, I know," Oscar conceded. "And I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about what Frances might be thinking. That's all. You want to speak to her tomorrow?"

"I'll speak to her," said Elinor. "Now go to sleep. And in the morning tell me *where* you get your ideas."

. . .

Next morning, after Oscar had gone off to work, Elinor and Frances sat on the upstairs porch while Frances nursed her infant daughter. Elinor was embroidering small pillowcases for Lilah's bassinet. She said to Frances, "Oscar thinks you're blue."

"I am blue." Frances smiled wanly.

"About Billy being gone, I guess."

Slowly Frances shook her head.

Elinor looked up, puzzled. “About what, then? Something in particular? I know after I had Miriam—and after I had you—I had low periods, too. Maybe all women—”

“No, Mama,” said Frances. “You know what it is? I’ve been thinking about...” She paused, leaned forward with the child against her breast, and whispered, *“...my other little girl.”*

Elinor dropped her sewing onto her lap in surprise.

“Mama,” said Frances, “that poor little baby doesn’t even have a name!”

“Let’s give her one, then.”

“You mean we can?”

“Why not? You don’t always want to be referring to her as ‘my other little girl,’ do you?”

“I’ve already thought of a name,” said Frances sheepishly.

“What?”

“In my mind I call her Nerita, ’cause that’s what you said *your* sister was named.”

“Shhh! Nobody but you even knows I *have* a sister.”

“But is Nerita all right? For a name, I mean.”

“That’s very sweet. And it’s just fine. You know what it means? It means, *of the water.”*

“That’s my little girl.”

Elinor took up her sewing. “Do you think about Nerita?”

Frances nodded. “All the time.”

“When she was born, you couldn’t even stand to look at her.”

“I know. But she’s still my little baby girl. I keep wondering if she’s all right.”

Elinor said nothing for a moment, and then quietly suggested, “Why don’t you go find out?”

Lilah turned away her mouth from her mother’s breast and Frances gently wiped the tiny lips with a fresh diaper folded over her shoulder.

“Could I, Mama?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“How would I find her?”

Elinor smiled. “Just go in the water. You’ll find each other.”

“I’m worried that she’s not getting enough to eat down there. Leaving Nerita in the river that night was just like putting Lilah here down on the kitchen floor and expecting her to fend for herself. Can you see Lilah here mixing biscuits or breading chicken?”

Elinor laughed. “But Lilah and Nerita are different. Nerita wouldn’t eat biscuits and breaded chicken if you put them on the end of a fishing hook.”

Frances shuddered. “Mama, don’t even say a thing like that! Don’t you think I’ve thought about what would happen if Nerita saw a worm dangling on a fisherman’s hook down there?”

Elinor shook her head and stood up. “Not going to happen. Now give Lilah to me and let me put her to sleep. You get into some other clothes and visit Nerita. Go around through the woods to the river. We don’t want Queenie and the rest of them seeing you go off toward the water.”

Elinor took Lilah while her daughter quickly undressed and slipped into a loose robe.

Frances smiled nervously at Zaddie as she went through the kitchen and out the back door. She slipped through the water oaks and into the forest to the west of the house. Soon she found herself on the clay-covered bank of the Perdido where the levee ended. She stood for several minutes on the edge of the water, at once anxious to avoid Nerita and yet fearful of not finding her. She remembered what the infant looked like, with what horror that form and visage had filled her, how alien Nerita had felt when she had held her in her arms. And now, actually to seek that embrace again, to enter the water and perhaps be surprised by Nerita flinging her small smooth arms around her neck or pressing her wide-eyed visage against Frances’s own! Frances dropped her robe and slowly waded into the river. She hesitated again when the water was no higher than her knees.

She felt the river water rushing against her legs and soon they felt rubbery. She knew that if she did not go farther in she would topple over. So she lifted one leg and then the other and then the first again, and realized that she was undergoing the transformation that remained—after all these years—so mysterious a thing to her. She lifted a foot clear of the water, and saw that the flesh of her leg below the knee had turned gray and thick and smooth. Her foot was wide and splayed and webbed.

Her first instinct was to throw herself completely into the river and allow the transformation to complete itself, as always before, without her

actually being aware of it. But this time, Frances decided it would be different. Inhaling deeply, Frances Caskey waded slowly into the Perdido.

As the water rose, so did the transformation. She stopped every few seconds to review the progress of the alteration; how thick she was growing below the waist, what the sensation was when she rubbed her legs together, what happened if she put one hand beneath the water and held it there.

That hand became wide and splayed and webbed, as big as a paper fan stuck in the pews at church.

She waded into deeper water. She could *feel* the strength that was gathering in her belly. She felt pangs of hunger for things that normally would have disgusted and revulsed her: living fish and shellfish swallowed whole, decaying animal carcasses, children's limbs, organic detritus.

She waded in up to her neck. She no longer had any difficulty maintaining her balance against the rushing water. She felt herself vast and strong and transformed below the surface. Her head, atop the huge body, felt absurdly small.

Just then she felt something slide against her webbed hand. Next the something nibbled at one finger, and then began moving up her arm toward her breast.

"Nerita!" Frances Caskey cried aloud, and ducked her head under the water. For a few seconds Frances's human eyes remained unchanged, and through the red Perdido water she saw Nerita's blurry form—already so much bigger!—making its way up along her arm. Even in her mother's heart, something was repelled by the aspect of a such a daughter as that.

Then Frances's eyes were altered, and she saw Nerita clearly. No longer was the form repulsive. Nerita clasped her mother about her neck and lovingly pressed her entire head inside her mother's mouth.

Some part of Frances's brain was surprised by this, but another part told how to caress that tender head lovingly with her own swollen black tongue.

. . .

At the dinner table that day, Oscar and Queenie were surprised to find Frances absent.

"Where is she?" Oscar asked.

"You were right about her low spirits," said Elinor. "So I sent her off for the day. I'm taking care of Lilah."

"Where did she go?" asked Queenie. "All the cars are still here."

Elinor smiled and shrugged and said she couldn't make anything of it either.

After the meal Elinor made excuses to Queenie, and Queenie went home, a little puzzled. She had the indistinct feeling that something was up over at Elinor's, and that it had to do with Frances and where Frances had gone. Queenie no longer wheedled information, and she reckoned that she would eventually find out what was going on if only she were patient.

. . .

Frances returned to the house late that afternoon, slipping in through the kitchen past the deliberately unobservant Zaddie. She ran upstairs, leaving damp muddy footprints all the way up the steps.

Elinor was in her bedroom, rearranging Oscar's closet.

Frances burst in.

Elinor laughed. "I guess you found her."

"She found me! And we had the best time! Lord, she grows quick! Mama, you ought to see what that child can do!"

"You don't know it, Frances, but I have been keeping my eye on Nerita."

"And I have been so worried. Why didn't you tell me!"

"Because I wanted to see if you were going to look after her yourself."

Frances shook her head. "That child doesn't *need* us, Mama. She can take care of herself."

"Well, I know that," said Elinor. "But that doesn't mean she won't benefit from a visit from her mama and her grandmama now and then."

Frances, still excited, cried, "Oh, Mama, when can I go back?"

Elinor laughed. "Not today. Look at your skin, you are all puckered up. And you are covered with Perdido mud. Oscar is coming home in half an hour. We've got to get you cleaned up. We've also got to make up a story about where you went and what you did. Queenie already noticed that you didn't go off in a car."

Frances waved this away. "Oh, I don't care *what* they think."

Elinor was suddenly serious. *"Yes you do care."*

Abruptly Frances was still.

"Good," said Elinor. "Calm down a little. You can tell me all about it, while we get you washed."

. . .

Zaddie, who now knew better than ever not to ask questions, mopped up Frances's muddy tracks. In Frances's bathroom, Elinor bathed her daughter and washed her hair, while Frances excitedly told what it was like to be with her daughter beneath the surface of the Perdido.

"You know what's different about this time, don't you?" asked Elinor as she poured a basin of water over Frances's soapy hair.

"Everything was different!"

"No," said Elinor. "The most important difference is that you remember everything that happened. You remembered *exactly* what it was like."

"Mama, I told you, that's because I took the change gradual. I waded into the water. I didn't just dive in the way I usually do. And this time I was *expecting* the change, that's all. That's why I remembered."

"You *wanted* the change."

"I did," admitted Frances. "For the first time, I guess. I guess I didn't think Nerita would be able to find me unless I..."

"Yes?" prompted Elinor.

"Unless I...looked like her," Frances said in a low voice.

Elinor smiled and wiped some soap off her daughter's face.

"You were gone so long," said Elinor indulgently. "I didn't know what had happened to you."

"You weren't *really* worried, though?"

Elinor shook her head. "Not one bit."

"Do you know that Nerita can already *talk?"*

"No, she can't."

"She *can,* Mama. I can understand every word she says."

"That's different," said Elinor. "You can understand her, but she can't talk. And neither can you, down there. But Nerita can understand you, too. You don't have to talk."

"Mama," said Frances after a few moments of consideration, "can we go down there together sometime and visit Nerita—both of us?"

"Maybe. But wouldn't you be upset?"

"About what?"

"Well," said Elinor, "you've never seen *me* down there."

"I know," said Frances quietly. "And I'd like to—so can we do it?"

Elinor laughed softly. "You sound like you're five years old again: 'Mama, can I do this? Mama, can I do that?' Well, yes, if we can find

somebody to take care of Lilah. Aren't you forgetting about Lilah?"

"A little," said Frances sheepishly. "But Lilah and Nerita are so different!"

"Yes," Elinor assented with a smile.

"But now that I can remember what happens, I know what it's like under the water. See, before," Frances said excitedly, "I'd go through the change and then come back and I wouldn't remember any of it. I had the feeling it was really awful, and I didn't know why I was doing it and it was all really horrible. Like the time out at Lake Pinchona when I—"

"When you ran into Travis Gann," said Elinor placidly.

"Yes," said Frances. "But that's not really what it's like most of the time. I was so mad at Travis Gann because of what he had done to Lucille. But today I wasn't mad at all, I was just having a good time with Nerita. Mama, that child—"

"You really do love her after all, don't you, baby?"

"Oh, Mama, I sure do! You know she can put her entire head inside my mouth!"

There was a little knock at the bathroom door and Zaddie's voice came timidly through: "Miss Frances?"

"What is it, Zaddie?" Elinor asked.

"Your baby's crying out here. I think she's hungry."

"Well, Mama," said Frances with a resigned sigh as she stepped out of the bathtub, "go on and bring her in. I guess I'll feed her before Daddy gets home."

. . .

Gathered for supper that night, the Caskeys wondered at the alteration in yet another family member—this time in Frances. It was a marked change not only from the despondency she had apparently felt since Billy had left on his trip, but from the general malaise of spirit that she had exhibited from the beginning of her pregnancy almost a year before. In fact, no one who saw her at table that night and listened to her voluble chatter and witnessed her grinning at nothing and eating an enormous plateful of food could remember a Frances to match this one.

"You must have bought out a store this afternoon!" exclaimed Queenie, to whom buying things was the pinnacle of happiness.

"Didn't spend a penny," laughed Frances. "Spent the whole afternoon with my baby."

“I thought you went out!” said Oscar.

Frances just laughed and shook her head.

And the wonderment of the family continued, because after that Frances left *every* afternoon, leaving Lilah napping in her bassinet. No one knew where she went. No one saw her leave the house. No cars were taken. Elinor said only, “Frances can’t stay cooped up all day. I imagine she goes for walks in the woods.”

Zaddie, who ought to have known *something*, said only, “I got enough to do around this house without tying a string to Miss Frances’s belt.”

Frances appeared deliriously happy these days. She seemed to miss her husband not at all, nor did she appear to be in the least disappointed when Miriam telephoned saying that she and Billy would be gone for another three days in order to visit Tulsa, as well. Lilah was a fretful baby and Frances seemed impatient with her, nursing her only when the child’s cries grew troublesome or her own breasts became heavy with milk. She otherwise took little notice of her little girl. Frances seemed quite happy to turn Lilah over to anyone who wanted to pet the baby, whether it was Zaddie or Elinor or Queenie.

“I think,” said Queenie confidentially to Elinor, “that being without Billy has driven Frances crazy. I have *never* seen her act this way before. And I have known her since she was a baby in her crib.”

Elinor defended her daughter, making excuses for her near neglect of Lilah, saying, “Frances is just being sweet to me. She knows how much I love this little girl. I have already asked Frances to give her up to me, but Frances says I have to get Billy’s permission before she’d sign any deed.”

Getting into bed a week and a half after his remarks to his wife about Frances’s sad mood, Oscar ventured to complain that Frances’s high spirits were getting on his nerves. Elinor punched his arm with her fist: “Oscar Caskey, ten days ago you were complaining to me that Frances was so low. Can’t you make up your mind? Can’t you be satisfied? Isn’t it enough that your little girl has found happiness?”

“What *I* don’t understand is,” said Oscar, “where is she finding it?”

Chapter 67

The Prodigal

Oscar Caskey greatly missed his daughter Miriam during the time that she was away in Texas attempting to lure the oil companies to the swamp south of Gavin Pond Farm. He discovered, in her absence, how responsible she was for the day-to-day running of the mill, and how much of the weight of the business she had taken from his shoulders. The plethora of small- and medium-weight decisions he was being forced to make was staggering, and he wondered how Miriam did it all. This recognition of his daughter's abilities and energy made him feel even older and more tired than he actually was at the end of each day; he understood now that Miriam was not simply an assistant to him. His daughter worked in the mill office so that he could spend mornings either in the forests or in the yard and his afternoons at home on the upstairs porch. It became clear that Miriam was now responsible for the success of the Caskey mills; Oscar was the assistant, the appendage, the helper operating at Miriam's convenience.

This revelation did not embitter Oscar. It only made him all the more anxious for Miriam's return.

Early one morning when Miriam and Billy had been gone a little over two weeks, the telephone rang. Oscar jumped out of bed and answered it, certain it was Miriam.

"Oscar," Miriam said, "Billy and I are starting home in two minutes."

"Oh, that's wonderful," sighed Oscar, "when do you think you'll get here?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

"How'd it all go?"

"Tell you when we get there. I'm not going to say anything important over the telephone. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, sweetness. We all miss you."

Oscar went downstairs. "She's on her way," he said.

Elinor immediately telephoned both Queenie and Sister; the information was a great relief to everyone.

. . .

Billy Bronze, on the drive home, thought about how successful the trip had been. While he had gladly agreed to accompany Miriam, he had been certain that she had been going about the matter in an entirely incorrect manner. One did not simply show up at the corporate headquarters of an oil company with surveyors' maps and geologists' reports. Somehow—and Billy wasn't quite sure how—the oil companies discovered potential oil-bearing property, and came to you. When Billy ventured, on the way to Houston, to tell this to Miriam, she replied, "Of course that's how it's done, normally. I know that. But I'm doing it differently."

They had stopped for a day in New Orleans. They had eaten lunch in a fine restaurant owned by the father of one of Miriam's former roommates at Sacred Heart, and after the meal Miriam had gone to the most expensive dress shop in town and bought eight hundred dollars' worth of new clothes. Billy sat in the shop in amazement as Miriam tried and bought one outfit after another. Miriam purchased clothes with all the excitement with which a vegetarian mother purchases red meat for her carnivorous family, and Billy couldn't understand why she did it. When they reached Houston, he learned.

They had been unceremoniously directed to the offices of an assistant manager for development for one of the major oil companies. Despite the obvious brush-off from the main office, Miriam waltzed in with her maps and her surveys and her reports under her arm. Her hair had been done at the hotel that morning, she was lushly perfumed, and she wore the first of her new outfits. She smiled as Billy had never seen her smile before. To the assistant manager she self-deprecatingly laughed at her inability to interpret any of this business for herself, and could he please help her? She introduced Billy as her brother-in-law who didn't know any more about it all than she did; he was just along to protect her in the big city.

Knowing Miriam, Billy was shocked that the man did not immediately see through her guile, but he did not. He was charmed, and saw before him only a soft, pretty young woman, helplessly ignorant of business and the proper way of doing things. Billy sat uncomfortably through this imposture. The assistant manager looked through the documents cursorily at first, then with increasing interest. He asked a few questions about the property south of Gavin Pond Farm, and five times he had to be told that yes, it was in Florida. He took up the report and the maps and said, "I'll be back in just a few minutes." He was back in twenty. Not once in that absence, even with

Billy and Miriam alone in the office, did Miriam drop her role, or speak one word out of her assumed character.

The assistant manager returned with a superior—*two steps above,* Billy conjectured. The superior smiled at Miriam, who beamed back and said, "Pleased to meet you. Will you please tell me the truth? Have Mr. Bronze and I been making fools of ourselves, coming here like this?"

The superior assured Miriam that they had not made fools of themselves, and that he would have been pleased to see them even if they had not brought such interesting papers along with them. The man wanted to know if they could possibly leave the maps and the reports with him for a few days. Miriam, who had carefully seen to the preparation of ten sets of the documents, hesitated, and then replied, "Well, if y'all promise me y'all will be real careful with them, and not get them mixed up with anybody else's."

The man promised.

Miriam gave him a calling card with her office telephone number written on it in a feminine script in violet ink on the reverse. "Billy," she said, "you give him one of yours, too."

Billy did so, but scarcely trusted himself to speak for fear he would laugh.

"We just had them made up last week," said Miriam engagingly. "Aren't they adorable! Mama told me nobody would take us seriously unless we had calling cards."

The man promised to telephone soon. After shaking Miriam's limp hand and Billy's sweating one, he hurried off with the maps and reports clutched tightly in his hand.

Billy did not realize until they had left the office that his shirt was wet through with perspiration.

"Hell," he whispered to Miriam as they were going past the secretary's desk.

"Shhh!" whispered Miriam, and to the secretary, said, "Bye-bye, honey."

In the hallway, elevator, and lobby Miriam maintained her assumed identity, but once out on the street, crowded with businessmen and secretaries on their way to lunch, exploded, "Oh, Lord, Billy, get me back to the hotel and *out of this damned dress."*

. . .

The oil company visits were accomplished with a precision and similarity that astonished Billy. Every morning Miriam wore a different outfit. Every morning they were admitted to the office of a man on the low end of the corporate echelon dealing with development. Every morning they were subsequently introduced to his superior, and after every meeting Miriam rushed back to the hotel to change out of those chafing, feminine clothes, and into pants, or even overalls. The afternoons were rough going for both Miriam and Billy in Houston—and later in Dallas and Tulsa—for there was nothing for them to do, and both were used to hard work. At first they had maintained separate rooms, but after the first night they had decided to share a room. It wasn't that they needed to save money, but they hated waste.

The question of seduction had been set aside by Miriam's matter-of-factness when she said after the first night in Houston: "You see what they're charging us for these rooms, Billy? And my room's got two beds. You come on in here tonight, and let that other room go. No sense in our taking fifteen dollars out of our pockets to put in theirs." That night, on the telephone to her father, Miriam said, "If Frances needs to speak to Billy, tell her that he's staying here in my room. This hotel charges fifteen dollars a night, and we decided we were damned if we were paying for two rooms."

"Miriam," said her father, "do you know that Billy snores?"

Billy was embarrassed at first that Miriam dressed and undressed right in front of him, until he realized that she never bothered to draw the shades either. She wasn't trying to seduce him or excite voyeurs in the neighboring buildings, she was simply unselfconscious and naturally immodest.

As he lay in bed that night, with Miriam asleep and snoring herself in the other bed, Billy wondered why he had chosen Frances rather than Miriam. It was an acknowledged fact in the family and in Perdido that Miriam was prettier. She was capable and smart, and Billy enjoyed her company. But she was like a sister to him, and Frances was definitely a wife. It was, he decided before he drifted off, another of those mysteries of the Caskey women.

In only one company out of the eight they visited were Miriam and Billy received with anything less than courtesy and interest. She let each of them know that she and Billy could be reached in about ten days or so in Perdido, but that they would be doing a little traveling until then.

"Let them stew," said Miriam.

At the end of their mission, she and Billy drove from Tulsa to Little Rock on the first day. On the second day, starting very early, they made it to Jackson, Mississippi, before stopping at noon for something to eat. They turned in at a dilapidated barbecue restaurant with fragrant smoke coming out of a wide chimney. Both ordered pork ribs, French-fried onions, and a beer.

After their meal they walked to the cash register and Billy paid their check. While he was waiting for his change, he was astonished to hear Miriam addressing the cook at the stove.

"What the hell are you doing back there?" she demanded in a sour voice.

Billy looked up. At the grill in back was a man about thirty, handsome in his way, but greasy and splattered with barbecue sauce, wearing a filthy apron and a dingy white shirt beneath that.

He had turned to Miriam with surprise and begun to reply automatically, "Hey, ma'am, I'm—" when he broke off, and exclaimed, "Miriam!"

"Get out from behind there," commanded Miriam. "This minute."

"Miriam," Billy said in a low voice, "who—"

"Now just a second," said the manager at the cash register, holding up a coarse fleshy hand.

The cook put down his spatula and came forward.

"Miriam?" he said again.

"Do you know who this is?" said Miriam angrily to Billy, paying no attention to the manager.

"Lord, no!" exclaimed Billy. "I have no idea in the world, Miriam."

"This is Malcolm. Malcolm Strickland, Queenie's son. Lucille's brother. Malcolm Strickland, what the hell do you think you're doing back there?"

"He's cooking for me!" said the manager indignantly, stretching out his hand to push Malcolm back toward the stove. "And there are people waiting, Strickland."

"Queenie thinks you are dead!" cried Miriam.

"She don't!"

"She does, 'cause you haven't written her in I-don't-know-how-many years. She thinks you probably got yourself killed in the Pacific somewhere. She looks at that picture of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima, and she says, 'I

wonder if one of those poor boys is Malcolm.' Why the hell haven't you picked up the telephone and called her?"

Malcolm didn't answer, but he began to retreat toward the stove.

"Danjo joined the army," said Miriam, raising her voice. "He married a German girl called Fred and now they're living in a castle on the top of some damn mountain. Queenie is spending all her time nursing Sister. Sister fell down the stairs when Early Haskew came after her, and hasn't got out of the bed since that day." Miriam's voice continued to rise in a crescendo. "Lucille has a baby boy called Tommy Lee, and she and Tommy Lee are living with Grace out on a farm south of Babylon, and there's millions and millions of barrels of oil under a swamp out there."

"Oil?" echoed Malcolm weakly, astounded by this unexpected flood of revelations in his family. He had imagined that in his absence, everything had remained the same.

"Malcolm Strickland," said Miriam, her voice now low and threatening, "get out from behind this counter, *right now."*

All the customers in the restaurant—some thirty or more—had stopped all pretense of eating and were following the little drama at the counter.

"Strickland," said the owner of the restaurant, "you get back to that stove. Ma'am," he said in exasperation to Miriam, "why the hell don't you just take off?"

Miriam flipped up the board that allowed entrance behind the counter, marched past the astounded manager, grabbed Malcolm's greasy arm, and pulled him out past the register.

"Get the car started," she said to Billy.

Billy, his change still on the counter, hurried out of the building. Miriam, with Malcolm in tow, headed after him.

"Leave the apron!" the restaurant owner shouted.

"Stand still," Miriam ordered Malcolm, then she spun him around. Undoing and then removing the apron, she flung it over the back of a chair and pulled Malcolm out the door.

"Get in the back seat," she commanded once they'd got outside.

"Miriam, where on earth—" Malcolm began.

"I am taking you back to Perdido, where you belong."

"Lord, Miriam, I cain't—"

He was already in the back seat.

"Are you married or something?" Miriam asked.

He shook his head.

"Have you bought a house?"

He shook his head again. "I got my clothes though," he ventured softly.

"Queenie'll buy you new ones," said Miriam. "Billy, let's go."

The owner of the restaurant stood in the front entrance of the restaurant, shouting that Malcolm was fired and would never find work in Hinds County again.

Miriam turned around in the seat. "James is dead—died a year ago—and left Queenie money."

Malcolm stared out the window, as if riding in an automobile were a thing completely new to him.

"Your old friend Travis Gann is gone, too. You know what he did? He went and raped your sister, that's what he did, and she got pregnant. But that's a secret, so not a single word, you hear, Malcolm?"

Malcolm nodded his head.

. . .

And so the journey back to Perdido continued with Malcolm in the back seat. He could hardly overcome his bewilderment at being summarily kidnapped from his job and his life of three years past. While Billy drove steadily southeast through the corn and cotton fields of Mississippi, Miriam would occasionally turn around to throw some piece of family or town news at Malcolm or to berate him for his treatment of Queenie.

It was dark by the time they crossed the Alabama line, and Miriam had dozed off. "Alabama," Billy said, and Miriam shook herself awake. "We'll be in Perdido in about an hour."

Malcolm said, "Miriam, you think Ma's gone want to see me?"

"Of course, she is," snapped Miriam. "But she's gone be mad to find out you're still alive."

"I treated her bad," said Malcolm.

"You sure did. Are you gone sponge off her for the rest of your life now?"

"Hey, I been working three years. I was in the army for six. I ain't been sponging off nobody."

"You're no-good, Malcolm," said Miriam. "And you're never going to amount to anything. I don't know why I bothered to pull you out from behind that counter."

“Neither do I,” sighed Malcolm from the darkness of the back seat.

. . .

The Caskeys were still at the table at Elinor’s when Billy, Miriam, and Malcolm pulled up before the house that night.

“I don’t want to go in,” said Malcolm.

“I wouldn’t either if I smelled like you,” said Miriam, getting out of the car. “Wait five minutes, Malcolm, and then come on inside. There’s no sense in putting off and putting off.”

Billy and Miriam staggered wearily into the house. As they stepped into the dining room everyone rose from the table to welcome them. Knowing of their probable return that evening, Lucille and Grace and Tommy Lee had come in from Gavin Pond Farm. The outcome of the trip to Texas would affect them most.

“This family has been falling apart!” exclaimed Queenie.

Frances embraced her husband.

“Did y’all bring us a million dollars in cash?” asked Grace facetiously.

“No,” returned Miriam. “What we brought back was a plugged nickel.”

“Oh,” said Queenie, “that’s too bad. We got the impression everything was going along pretty well.”

“There’s no problem about the oil,” said Miriam airily, “I imagine my phone’ll start ringing tomorrow.”

“The phone started ringing two days ago,” said Oscar, “but I told them that you were still out of town and there wasn’t anybody else they could talk to.”

Billy, still holding his wife close, looked over Frances’s shoulder, and said, “Miriam and I have got a surprise out in the car.”

“Oh,” cried Queenie excitedly. “Y’all brought us presents. I bet it’s moccasins, and Indian stuff. Y’all were in Oklahoma, weren’t you? You know I’ve got a brother in Oklahoma, I haven’t heard from Pony in—”

Queenie broke off at the sound of the front screen door banging shut.

“Who is that?” asked Elinor.

“That,” Miriam replied, “is the surprise.”

In the doorway stood Malcolm, dingy, rumpled, wan, smelling of rancid grease and barbecue sauce.

Queenie screamed and collapsed into her chair.

“Oh, Lord!” cried Lucille, and jumped behind her mother’s chair as if she needed protection.

“We thought you were dead,” said Grace in a low voice.

“Well, he’s not,” said Miriam. “Found him outside of Jackson, looking just about like he does now except he had an apron on then. Malcolm, now that everybody’s seen you, maybe you could do us all a favor and go over to Queenie’s and take a bath.”

“What’ll I wear when I get out of the tub?” said the bewildered Malcolm, glancing down at his clothes. He looked around the room at his family, and explained, “She wouldn’t stop. I guess she thought I’d run away. I wouldn’t have. I sort of missed Perdido. Miriam said James was dead. That’s too bad.” Then he turned and shuffled out into the darkness of the hallway.

Queenie screamed again and ran after him. “Malcolm! Malcolm!”

“He’s all grown up!” marveled Grace to Lucille. “I cain’t hardly believe it.”

“If y’all had told me,” said unperturbed Zaddie, coming into the dining room from the kitchen, “I would have killed the fatted calf.”

Chapter 68

New Year's

Though she was bone weary, Miriam was up late the night of her return from Texas. Sister wouldn't let her go to bed. Sister was angry that Miriam had stayed away so long. Sister was mad that Miriam had telephoned so infrequently. Sister first wanted to hear Miriam tell one story, about her success with the oil companies for instance, but almost as quickly as Miriam had begun it, Sister interrupted with a demand for another tale altogether. "Tell me what you thought when you saw Malcolm standing at that stove in the barbecue restaurant, darling." Sister's mind wouldn't stay fixed. One minute she would be demanding that Miriam walk across the room and hug her, and the next Sister would almost weep for her own unhappiness at being abandoned for such a protracted time.

"You know what happened to me when you were gone?" Sister said accusingly.

"What?" said Miriam wearily, sitting in a wicker chair next to the door, as if to make a very quick exit if Sister would ever let her go.

"You know who walked in this house right through the front screen door and nobody lifted a finger to stop him from doing it?"

"Who?"

"Early. Early walked right in the door in the middle of the night. Walked right in this room one night and said, 'Sister, come back to Mobile with me.' Tried to pull me out of the bed. I said, 'Early, my legs will crumble right under me and you will have a mess on your hands.' I told him, 'Early, I'm a cripple.' He said, 'You're not,' and said, 'When you get out of that bed, I'm coming to get you.'"

Miriam's head lolled. She scarcely followed Sister's report.

"So you know what that means?" cried Sister angrily.

"What?" murmured Miriam.

"It means *I will never leave this bed again. That's* what it means."

This did get Miriam's attention, and she looked up. "You don't mean that."

"I do."

“You are in that bed waiting for your leg to mend. You should have been up a month ago at the least.”

“I’m never gone leave this bed,” Sister repeated adamantly. “Not if Early Haskew is in his car parked out front looking in my windows with field glasses waiting to see me hobble down the hall so he can run in and get me.”

“Early’s not going to come and get you,” said Miriam. “He cain’t take you away if you don’t want to go.”

“We’re married!”

“Doesn’t make any difference,” said Miriam, shaking her head.

“Fix my pillows,” said Sister.

“I will not,” said Miriam, her strength returning with her anger. “If you think for one minute that you are going to lie in that bed and be waited on by all of us for the rest of your life, giving up our comfort and our free time in order to plump your pillows and empty your bed pans and bring you magazines, you are sadly mistaken, Sister.”

“My leg hurts so bad, Miriam! Why do you want to talk to me like that? Why do you want to say harsh words to an old crippled woman like me? An old crippled woman who cain’t even get out of the bed to go to the bathroom when she has to go?”

“You’re no more crippled than I am,” said Miriam, now totally revived. “If I were smart, what I’d do is drive you way out in the country, open the car door and push you out, and make you *walk* back to Perdido.”

“You’d do it too, wouldn’t you!” cried Sister. “I bet you would, for meanness’ sake.”

“I’m not the mean one anymore,” remarked Miriam. “I’m not the one who makes Queenie stay over here with me seven hours a day when she could be doing whatever she wanted to be doing in her own house. I’m not the one who makes it impossible for Ivey to get any work done because she has to run upstairs every three minutes to do something for the cripple in the bed. I’m not the one who keeps somebody up far into the night, somebody who’s just come back from a long hard trip.”

“That’s me, I suppose. I suppose you’re talking about me.”

“I am,” declared Miriam, rising.

Sister picked up a magazine of crossword puzzles from her bedside table and flung it at Miriam. It sailed through the air and struck Miriam on the inside of her elbow.

“Good-night to you, too,” said Miriam and stalked out of the room.

Sister screamed out: “Miriam, wait! Wait!”

Miriam marched down the hall and turned back only when she had reached the door of her room.

Peering down to the end of the hall and in through the open doorway of Sister’s room, she saw Sister struggle to get out of the bed. She watched as Sister pushed aside the mountain of pillows on which she had rested for so long and with a loud groan turn herself sideways on the bed and force her legs off the side.

“Miriam!” Sister called.

“I’m here.”

Sister slid carefully off the side of the bed until her feet touched the floor. Gradually she increased her weight on them until she let go of the bed, which she had been using as support.

“See!” cried Miriam. “You’re not a cripple.”

Sister took a step toward the hallway. Then another. Suddenly her left leg jackknifed and she dropped to the floor in a heap. Her pale brow hit the polished wooden floor with a resounding thud.

Miriam ran back down the hall and into the room. She gathered Sister up—it was no difficulty, as Sister was woefully thin—and lifted her back onto the bed. Then, one limb at a time, Miriam made Sister comfortable on the high mattress, arranging the covers over her and the pillows behind her. She wet a cloth in the bathroom and bathed the bump on Sister’s forehead.

“Fix my pillows,” Sister groaned. Miriam did so.

“Are you all right now?”

“No,” said Sister. “You have just turned me into a living temple of pain.”

“Do you want me to call Leo Benquith?”

“What good could he do? Call Queenie.”

“Not at this time of night with Malcolm just back!”

“I know they’re up over there, they’re bound to be, with you bringing Malcolm back and all.”

“I’m not going to ask Queenie to come over here at one o’clock in the morning,” said Miriam.

“She’ll come,” said Sister confidently. “She always does.”

Miriam said nothing. She merely turned and walked out of the room.

Sister picked up the telephone, and while waiting for the operator to come on, she called out to the retreating Miriam, “See, I told you I was a cripple.”

. . .

Despite the lateness of the hour, as Sister had predicted, everyone in Queenie’s household was still up when Sister called. Queenie had taken Malcolm home, pushed him into the bedroom, pressed him into the bathroom, received his reeking clothes through the cracked door, shoved others in, and actually sat on the edge of the bed biting her fingernails while Malcolm bathed away the smell of grease and barbecue sauce and replaced it with the fragrance of the best of James’s scented soaps.

Afterward, with Malcolm squeezed tightly into a pair of Oscar’s trousers and one of his shirts, the reunited family sat in the living room staring at one another. Grace had taken Tommy Lee back to Gavin Pond Farm, but had left Lucille at her mother’s. “I want to hear what Malcolm has got to say for himself,” said Lucille. “Four years and not one word!”

Malcolm, it turned out, had little to say. He had been in the army, which they all knew. He had trained in North Dakota, fought in Italy, and been honorably discharged in Massachusetts. He had learned two skills: bricklaying and cooking for crowds. After leaving the army, he had laid brick sidewalks in Boston, but union difficulties had relieved him of that job. He had come south and found work with a contracting firm in Little Rock. Fired from a job the company was working on in Jackson, he had picked up work at a downtown diner. The barbecue restaurant had been his fourth position as cook.

“Doesn’t sound like you were building up much of a homelife,” remarked Lucille, to whom homelife had become important.

“I was not,” said Malcolm contritely.

“This is your home,” said Queenie.

Malcolm did not answer, but it appeared to his mother and sister that he was not denying the proposition. His silence implied he felt unworthy of his mother’s kindness.

“You think Oscar or somebody could find me some work around here?” he asked.

“Doing what?” Queenie asked.

“Cooking, maybe. Or laying bricks.”

“Which do you like better?” asked Lucille.

Malcolm shrugged. “Don’t matter much to me.”

“Lord,” said Queenie, “I’m sure they can find you *something*, Malcolm. I don’t know, maybe they’re gone want to brick in the levee or something. I just want to know, Malcolm—”

“What, Ma?”

“If we *did* find you something, would you stay around? And be good? And *work* at it, whatever it was?”

“Oh, Ma,” said Malcolm softly. “You don’t know me no more. See, what you remember about me is that trial and getting in trouble with Travis Gann and all that and almost going to jail. See, that’s what you think when you call me up in your mind. But that’s not me anymore. I wasn’t even twenty years old then. Now I’m almost thirty. I was in the army six years and four months. And I’ve been here and I’ve been there, holding down jobs, meeting people. Bricklaying’s all right when it’s nice out, but not in the sun. Cooking’s all right if you don’t mind smelling of grease and always being sweaty and dirty. There was times I got fired, and I got fired ’cause I got mad or somebody got mad at me and we got in a fight or something, but most of the time it wasn’t my fault. I’d tell you if it was, but it wasn’t. Ma, you probably think I was away ten years and I got to be just like Pa was. But I’m not like him. I never went to jail, I wasn’t arrested but once and that was up in Boston in a bar, and that wasn’t even my fight. That was somebody else’s fight and they just hauled us all off. That’s all that was. So I see y’all looking at me like ‘Who’s he gone beat up next?’ and ‘Who’d he kill last week?’ but that’s not it.”

Queenie, who had been sitting at the other end of the sofa from Malcolm, jumped suddenly closer and embraced him.

“I know it’s not! I always knew it wasn’t!”

Malcolm laughed. “No, you didn’t. Did she, Lucille? You thought I was wasting away in a state pen somewhere, that’s what you thought, wasn’t it, Ma?”

Queenie shook her head. “I thought you died on Iwo Jima.”

. . .

Sister called then, demanding Queenie’s presence. Queenie pressed her weary son into bed, and then went next door and heard Sister’s complaints until dawn.

The next day, Queenie took Malcolm to Pensacola and bought him new clothes. He was alarmed by the amount of money she spent on him and

protested against such prodigality.

"Malcolm," Queenie protested, "I've got the money. What better thing can I do with it than spend it on my children? Malcolm, you want me to buy you this whole store? 'Cause I could!"

At subsequent meals at Elinor's, Malcolm's future was discussed at length. Bricklaying and cooking for large groups were not skills demanded by Perdido, and anyway Queenie thought it was time Malcolm had a respectable job. Malcolm's skills, though, were meager, employment was scarce, and nobody—it seemed for a time—had any use for him. The weeks went by, and time hung heavy on Malcolm's hands.

When he was very busy, Billy Bronze would call up Malcolm and ask him to run down to Pensacola or Mobile and deliver papers or pick up papers or transact some small piece of business. Malcolm consented, and Queenie usually went along for the ride. Billy told Miriam about Malcolm's usefulness, and she employed him in a similar manner to carry cash out to a farmer in Washington County who distrusted checks or to deliver a bushel of fresh corn from Gavin Pond Farm to the wife of the Representative to Congress.

Malcolm become known in the family for his willingness to perform these trivial but time-consuming and inconvenient errands. Soon he was doing jobs for Elinor and Sister as well. If a gutter came down in a storm, Malcolm arranged for someone to come and fix it. If a dress bought in Mobile was the wrong size, Malcolm returned it. If train tickets were needed, Malcolm drove up to Atmore and got the right ones. He kept the Caskey cars serviced and filled with gas. He made sure wood and coal were ordered, and he swatted the bats that sometimes flew down Elinor's chimneys. He was unable to repair a carpet sweeper himself, but he could be certain that the job was done within the day. If anything went wrong in any of the Caskey houses, the Caskeys sat back and said, "Somebody call up Malcolm and tell him to take care of it." By the end of the summer Malcolm was as busy as Miriam and Billy in their offices. He had become a sort of major domo to the Caskeys, and they began to wonder how they had ever done without him. Billy offered him a salary.

"But what is my job?" he asked. "I'm happy to do all these things, 'cause I'm really not doing anything else."

"Keeping things going smoothly is worth money, Malcolm," said Billy. "And we can afford to pay you. Take the money."

The Caskeys scarcely remembered the old Malcolm with this new Malcolm before them. It was universally agreed that he must have had a difficult time away from Perdido. He was quiet, but he wasn't meek; he was controlled. His temper remained, but when he felt it rising over some perceived slight or contretemps, he would walk away, fling large rocks at the nearest object unlikely to be injured by such an attack, slug down a bottle of warm beer from a case that he always kept in the back of the car, and soon he was placid again. At times his moodiness was of longer duration. He then kept to his room. Queenie would put food on a tray and leave it outside his door. No one attempted to coax him out, and afterward no one asked what the trouble was.

Miriam treated Malcolm as she treated everyone: offhandedly, impatiently, and with a sometimes grueling forthrightness. Queenie cringed at some of the things Miriam said to her son, but Malcolm defended Miriam: "What she says is right, Mama, and you know it."

"She doesn't have to say it out loud, though, Malcolm, and certainly not where other people can hear it."

. . .

Miriam was busy. The oil companies had, with one exception, telephoned, asking for more information. The executives could scarcely believe that Miriam on the telephone from her office in Perdido was the same "hapless" lady in the feminine dresses who had sighed and protested in their offices in Texas and Oklahoma. To them all, Miriam said, "You're not the only ones interested. Send a man out here to see me first, and I'll show him what's what. Then you can send somebody else to talk money."

She wouldn't listen to first offers of contracts for exploratory drilling. The men on the phone always attempted to persuade her: "Let us handle it all for you, Miss Caskey."

"No, thank you," Miriam would reply crisply. "If you're really interested, send me a geologist, an engineer, an accountant, and a lawyer. And then we'll talk some business."

And so over the next few weeks, men of those professions began arriving in Perdido, at staggered intervals, and were put up at the Osceola Hotel. Miriam and Malcolm would drive them out to Gavin Pond Farm and introduce them to Grace and Lucille. In two small boats with motors, Malcolm and Grace guided the oil company men through the swamp. Miriam would sit in the prow of one boat and Lucille in the prow of the

other, holding aloft paddles to beat off alligators and water moccasins. Miriam was no longer frightened of the swamp, because she perceived it to be in the interests of business.

Miriam knew these trips were unnecessary, because her own geologists' and engineers' reports were sufficient. She wanted, however, to find out something about the differences in the oil companies, and did not see a better way of doing this than by meeting their chosen representatives.

A month after her return from Texas, Miriam and the other Caskeys signed a preliminary contract allowing Texas National Oil to drill two exploratory wells in the swamp. Theirs was not the highest bid but, certain that there was oil beneath the swamp, Miriam had been more interested in contracting for favorable percentages after the oil had been found and extracted. Texas National raised the Caskey royalty schedule two points in exchange for Miriam's agreement to bear the cost of one of the two exploratory wells. It was anticipated that six months' time would be required to work out details and to transport the proper machinery to Florida, where no one had ever drilled before.

. . .

"Those things cost a lot of money," said Oscar at supper the evening following the final signing of the papers. "Are you sure that was a smart thing to do?"

Miriam shrugged. "We'll make it up in the first year from the percentage they're offering."

"If there's oil," Oscar pointed out.

"Elinor says there is," said Miriam, glancing at her mother across the table. "And that's what I'm going on. If we all end up at the poor farm, y'all can blame Elinor and not me."

Because of the mill, the town bustled and thrived, while the Perdido and Blackwater rivers flowed so peacefully and out of sight beyond the red levees. Frances Caskey swam in the Perdido every day—that was known in town, and a fact sometimes used as an argument by ten- and eleven-year-old boys whose parents had placed the river off-limits.

"Frances Caskey," their parents pointed out, "was teaching swimming out at Lake Pinchona before you were born, and if her family wants to let her risk her life every afternoon, they can. But *you*, young man, are not going to be sucked down to the bottom of the junction. That is that."

These parents didn't know, however, of the time-honored custom among boys in Perdido of skinny-dipping in the river on New Year's Day. The ritual was not exactly pleasant, for the water was cold at the beginning of January. Among the boys, however, this rite was both a statement of imagined independence and a kind of dare brought about by the experience and example of older brothers. A spot south of town, where the Perdido is wide and shallow, was usually chosen; not even ten-year-olds wanted to risk the danger of being sucked into the whirlpool at the junction. On New Year's Day of 1948, seven young Perdido boys sneaked out of their houses at nine o'clock in the morning and variously made their way to the clandestine place. The day was overcast and chilly as they shucked their jackets, shirts, suspenders, trousers, and underwear. One by one they dived into the water, employing the broken-off trunk of a fallen tree for a springboard. The water was colder than any of them imagined, and the boys' teeth chattered in the water even as they shouted for their reluctant companions to jump in. Finally, even the most timid boy had slipped down the muddy bank and flailed screaming into the cold muddy water. The seven boys swam around, bared their chattering teeth, dunked and splashed about, and eventually agreed that it was time to get out.

Six boys scrambled up the muddy bank.

The seventh—the younger Gully boy, whose father owned Perdido's car dealership—was missing. His friends ran up and down the bank, calling his name frantically. They plied the water with long sticks; they screamed into the air imprecations against him for scaring them so; they stared helplessly at the swiftly flowing muddy water and swore a blood oath that none of them would reveal that they had been a party to the disappearance of their companion. They knew their parents would never allow them out of the house again. They crept home by various routes, ready with elaborate excuses—trembling victims of guilt.

By the end of that day, Mrs. Gully realized that her boy was missing. A great hue and cry went up. The other six boys, his friends, were questioned. Their teeth chattered as they spoke the lie, but each maintained he knew nothing at all. The missing boy's clothing was found on the banks of the Perdido, and the Gullys were astonished that their son seemed to have gone swimming, alone, on New Year's Day. The Gullys, who had lived in Perdido all their lives, knew how many children those red, muddy waters had swallowed already. They did not expect to see their son again. An old

man with a grappling hook was sent out on the river for a few days, but that was only for form's sake and the comfort of the grandparents in Mississippi. The Perdido, everyone knew, never gave up its dead.

. . .

New Year's Day of 1948 was a Thursday. That evening at supper Frances Bronze had appeared troubled, and after the meal, when most everyone was in the front parlor, Elinor motioned to her daughter to follow her upstairs.

"What is wrong, darling?" said Elinor, as she ushered her daughter into her bedroom and closed the door. Frances sat on the edge of her parents' bed and glanced out the window at the mass of water oaks.

"Little boy died today, Mama. Gully boy."

"I heard they were looking for him," said Elinor guardedly. "I didn't hear they had found him."

"They haven't found him," said Frances slowly. "They won't."

Elinor went to the window. "Nerita?" she asked.

"Yes," said Frances.

When Elinor turned around, Frances was weeping softly.

"Darling," said Elinor, "these things happen."

"I told her not to do something like that! I told her never to go *near* people in the water. Why cain't she just eat fish! She *loves* catfish."

"Well," said Elinor softly, "you can't make a whole diet out of catfish."

"Mama!"

Elinor sat beside Frances and put her arm around her. "Listen, honey, you've got to remember. Nerita's not like you and me. You and I can get along pretty well on Dollie's beef and pork and veal—and Malcolm's venison when he goes out in the woods and shoots a deer. But where is Nerita going to get pork and beef and veal and venison? She's a big girl now, but she's still growing. She probably thought she needed it—"

"Mama! What if they started hunting for her!"

Elinor smiled. "They couldn't find her, darling. Nerita would just sit at the bottom of the junction until they went away. I'd like to see somebody try to pull anything up out of *there."*

"Aren't you upset about the Gully boy, Mama? You know that boy's parents, and they're real sweet. Queenie is *always* buying a new car from that man, and he's always so polite to us."

"Of course, I'm sorry for them," said Elinor. "But there's nothing we can do. And what was that boy doing in the river on New Year's Day

anyway? It's cold out there!"

"Nerita said there were a bunch of them down there, below town. She said"—here Frances grimaced—"that she could have gotten them all if she had wanted to."

Elinor smiled, and there was something of pride in it. She said, "There's no stopping that girl, is there?"

"No, ma'am."

Mother and daughter were silent for a few moments.

"There's something else bothering you isn't there?"

Frances nodded.

"What is it?"

"I don't think I want to tell."

"But you'll tell anyway, won't you? Otherwise, you wouldn't have come up here with me. You wouldn't have told me anything, if you weren't going to tell me everything. What is it?"

"Nerita didn't eat all of the Gully boy."

"No?" said Elinor.

"No, *she saved me part."*

Chapter 69

Billy's Armor

Since his return from Texas, Billy Bronze had noticed a change in his wife. "Distant" didn't seem quite the word for it, "preoccupied" was more like it —and preoccupied with something besides their infant daughter Lilah. He wondered at first whether he hadn't angered Frances by going away for two weeks with her sister. He asked her about this.

"Frances," he said carefully one morning while he was dressing for work and she was changing the baby's diaper, "you know what I wish?"

"What?"

"I wish I hadn't gone off with Miriam to Texas."

"Why not?" asked Frances. "Miriam said she needed you."

"She didn't, though. She did everything just fine all by herself."

"Then she needed you for company. Deep down inside Miriam's not as independent as everybody thinks she is. As *she* thinks she is. So you were keeping her company, and letting her know that she was doing things right."

"Then it doesn't bother you that I went?"

Frances looked up in surprise. "Were you thinking that it bothered me? Why should it bother me?"

"I don't know," returned Billy lamely. "'Cause you might have thought..."

"Thought what?" asked Frances in perplexity. Then suddenly she realized what he meant. "That something was going on?"

Billy nodded.

Frances laughed. "You and Miriam? What a thing to say, Billy!"

"Why is it such a thing to say?"

"Because if you had wanted Miriam instead of me, then you'd be married to her. You had your choice when you first came to Perdido. And if Miriam had wanted you, why you'd be over next door and *Miriam* would be the one changing diapers. *That's* why it's such a funny thing to say. Billy, you don't really think I was imagining that something was going on between you two, do you? Wait'll I tell Mama, won't she laugh out loud!"

Billy was perplexed by his wife's attitude. He hadn't thought the thing quite so improbable as Frances was making it out to be.

“We slept in the same hotel room,” he pointed out.

“Everybody knows what Miriam is like when it comes to spending money. She wasn’t gone *let* you have a separate room—I knew that when you two took off. Lord, Billy, she’s my *sister.”* Frances pulled open her housecoat, and pressed Lilah against her left breast. Sitting down in the platform rocker in the corner of her room next to the porch window she began to rock. Lilah fed with her eyes closed contentedly.

“Well,” said Billy, “if that’s not what’s been bothering you, what *has* it been?”

“What are you talking about now?”

“You’ve been thinking about something else.”

“When?”

“All the time. Every time somebody says something to you, it’s got to be repeated, ’cause you’re never listening. You don’t think about Lilah until she starts to cry, or unless Zaddie comes up here and tells you it’s time to feed her. You’re always standing at the window and looking out at the levee, like there was something real important on your mind. Darling, I just want to know if there’s something I can help with.”

Frances was silent a moment, then turned serious. She responded in a quiet voice, that had something in its tone that indicated to her husband that this was not a lie, but an evasion. “It’s nothing, Billy. No, I tell you what it is, it’s being a mother. It’s new to me. It’s strange. I wasn’t prepared. I’m always thinking about my little girl.”

Billy laughed uneasily. “Then why does she always need changing every time I pick her up?”

“See?” said Frances hastily. “I’m not used to it yet. I’m not sure exactly how things are supposed to be done. That’s all. Pretty soon I’ll figure out exactly what I’m supposed to do.”

This exchange did not entirely satisfy Billy Bronze. And his unease increased when he returned to the house one afternoon and discovered Elinor on the porch with Lilah gently sleeping in her lap.

“Where’s Frances?” he asked, looking about the porch as if his wife might have been hiding behind the pyramid of ferns in the corner or crouching behind the glider.

“Oh,” Elinor replied vaguely, “she went off somewhere...”

“How long has she been gone?”

“Awhile.”

“She shouldn’t run off and make you take care of Lilah.”

“Lord, Billy, I don’t mind! I love this baby! I wish I had this baby all for my own!”

At that moment, he heard his wife’s footsteps on the hall stairs. He went to the porch door to meet her as she came up. He was astounded to find her wet and bedraggled, barefooted, her teeth chattering in the crisp February air.

“What the hell have you been doing?” he exclaimed.

“Swimming,” replied Frances.

“In weather like this? It’s freezing out there.”

“In the water I’m fine,” breathed Frances, trying to edge past her husband to get to their room. “It’s only when I get out that I’m cold.”

Billy followed her into the bathroom. Frances dropped her robe and ran hot water into the tub.

“I’m covered with mud,” she said, and that was the truth.

“How long were you out there, Frances? I called here right after dinner and Zaddie said you weren’t here. It’s four o’clock now—you were swimming in the Perdido for *three hours?”*

Frances shrugged, and stepped gingerly into the hot water. “You know how it is, Billy, you lose track of the time. And Mama *loves* taking care of Lilah. You want to wash my hair?”

. . .

In the following months matters only grew worse, as far as Billy could see. He was very busy with the oil companies; there was another visit to Texas with Miriam and then he went a third time on his own. Each trip lasted several days. Frances grew more and more distant from him and their daughter, even though she denied that anything had changed. Elinor denied it, too. Billy realized that Lilah had been placed in almost complete care of his mother-in-law and Zaddie. Frances weaned Lilah at eight months, and shortly thereafter Lilah’s bassinet was moved downstairs with Zaddie. “Her crying keeps me awake,” Frances explained. “There have been nights when I couldn’t get to sleep at all.”

Frances seemed to be developing an actual abhorrence to her daughter. She never talked about her, never picked her up, never played with her. When Billy spoke of Lilah, Frances changed the subject. When Billy picked Lilah up, Frances turned her head. When Billy played with Lilah, Frances left the room on a lame excuse. He mentioned these things to Elinor, but she

as usual denied there was a problem. If Billy saw anything wrong, said Elinor, it must be that he was working too hard, or was experiencing the inevitable letdown that follows childbirth, or perhaps it was the effects of the bad winter weather. In other words, any cause that had nothing to do with Frances.

If ever Billy telephoned home in the afternoon, wanting to speak to Frances, she was never there. This was true whether he called right after he had returned to his office after lunch, or in the middle of the afternoon, or half an hour before he was to come home. Elinor always told him that she was out shopping, or at the seamstress's, or delivering a pound cake to somebody who was sick. Whenever Billy sought to verify any of these stories, Frances said, "Oh, no, Mama was wrong. I just drove out to Dollie Faye's to pick up some bacon. I walked in the door right after Mama hung up the phone."

Sometimes at night, after they had turned out the light, Billy would turn on his pillow and beg Frances to tell him what was the matter with her, why she was acting in this way.

"Nothing is the matter, Billy, nothing at all."

He had thought at first that hers might be a physical ailment and urged her to see either Leo Benquith or the new doctor in town. Frances wouldn't go. "Nothing is wrong with me, Billy. I feel fine."

And, in fact, Frances seemed to grow healthier by the day. Billy was startled almost beyond words to discover that she seemed to be growing—Frances was now almost as tall as he! He made her stand against the doorframe of their room and he marked her height with a pencil. Then he stood against the frame and she marked his. Her mark was only an inch or two short of his.

"I *know,"* he exclaimed, "that when we got married, you were a good five inches shorter than me."

"I'm wearing my hair different," Frances explained. "And I do stretching exercises."

She seemed to be getting stronger, too. One morning after breakfast Billy had started out the front door on his way to work, but then spun around and went back inside, having forgotten some letters on his dresser. He went upstairs, walked down the hall, and was about to enter the bedroom when he was stopped dead in his tracks by what he saw. Frances was crouched at the corner of the bed, and with a single hand she was

lifting the bed at the corner, reaching for something that had apparently rolled under it. He watched astonished as she retrieved a pearl earring and gently set the bed back in place.

"Frances!" he cried. "You are gone break your back doing something like that!"

Standing up, Frances merely remarked, "Oh, that old bed just looks heavy. It's not really."

Billy went over, placed his hand on the bedpost and attempted to lift it. For his pains he got a cramp in his upper arm.

. . .

Billy made a fourth trip to Houston, again with Miriam, in April 1948. This time Malcolm drove, while Billy and Miriam sat in the back of the new Cadillac that Billy had bought for the family, looked over papers and correspondence, and endlessly talked strategy. On each of the six days they were in Texas, Billy telephoned his wife. Three times she was not at home, once she was sleeping and Zaddie refused to wake her, and twice he was able to speak to her briefly. On this trip Billy and Malcolm shared a room, and Miriam had one to herself.

"Miriam," he said to his sister-in-law over before-dinner drinks on the night before they were to return to Perdido. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"About what?" Miriam asked. Miriam had decided that on this last evening, with everything accomplished that needed to be accomplished, she and Malcolm and Billy would celebrate by going out to Houston's best restaurant. Miriam wore a new dress, and she had minutely supervised Malcolm into a new suit. She kept an eagle eye on his manners at the table, and had said, "Don't bother looking at the menu, Malcolm, I'm going to order for you."

"About Frances," Billy went on, after the waiter had taken their orders. "Frances—haven't you noticed—has changed since Lilah was born."

"How?" asked Malcolm.

"How?" asked Miriam.

"Just...changed." Billy shrugged. "Does funny things. Doesn't pay any attention to Lilah. Zaddie and Elinor are raising that baby. I think the only time Frances even holds that child is when I'm home and I actually pick Lilah up and put her in Frances's arms."

“Maybe Frances doesn’t like babies,” suggested Miriam. “I don’t think I would.”

“I don’t think she likes *Lilah,”* said Billy. “It’s almost like she thinks she got hold of the wrong one, and this is a substitute and she doesn’t want anything to do with it.”

“Maybe she’s mad ’cause you’re always going off to Texas,” said Miriam.

“She says she isn’t.”

“Malcolm,” said Miriam, “get the waiter’s attention. And try to do it without standing up and waving your arms over your head.”

Malcolm nodded to the waiter. He came to the table and Miriam ordered another round of drinks.

The second drink loosened Billy’s tongue more. “You know what else she does?”

Miriam shook her head. “What?”

“She thinks I don’t know she does it.”

“What does she do?” asked Malcolm.

“She goes swimming every day in the Perdido. She swims in the Perdido for hours and hours.”

“She gets that from Elinor,” Miriam pointed out. “You ought to blame Elinor for that.”

“She did it even in the winter,” Billy said. “Even that one day it was so cold the pipes froze, Frances went swimming in the Perdido. I call up in the afternoon, and she’s never there. Elinor always gives me some excuse or Zaddie makes something up about where she is, but I *know* where she is. She’s swimming in that damn river. I could go up to the top of that levee and look down and there’d be Frances, swimming round and round in water that would freeze a man’s...”

“...balls off,” said Malcolm, completing the thought.

“You’ve seen her swimming?” asked Miriam, while glancing balefully at Malcolm.

“No, but I know she does it.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes,” Miriam said.

“It makes a difference!” cried Billy. “And I don’t know why either. ’Cause she won’t tell me that’s what she does. ’Cause she won’t have anything to do with Lilah. ’Cause I’m afraid,” he said in a low voice, “that

one of these days she's going to up and get a divorce with a Mobile lawyer."

"Divorce you!" exclaimed Miriam.

"Well, she obviously doesn't love me anymore. If she loved me, she'd love our little girl. She wouldn't always be lying to me. She'd tell me what the real trouble is. I thought she loved me."

"I thought she did too," said Miriam. "But what if she doesn't?"

"Then she'll want to get rid of me," said Billy.

"Not necessarily," Miriam pointed out. "Maybe she'd let you stay on."

Billy shook his head. "Miriam, don't you understand? I love this family. I don't want to leave Perdido. See, *that's* what I'm afraid of, that Frances will want to get rid of me, and will make me get out of town."

Miriam laughed. "Billy, is that what you're worried about? You really think we'd let you go? Even if you and Frances did get a divorce, Elinor doesn't want to get rid of you. She'd just have you move into the front room. And if Frances doesn't want you in the house, then you can come live with Sister and me, that's all. We're not gone let you leave town. That's the silliest thing I ever heard a grown man say. Malcolm, don't crunch your ice."

Billy looked at Miriam perplexed.

"I cain't run this thing single-handed," said Miriam. The liquor was loosening her tongue, too. She shook her head. "Oscar's no good. He's backing out. He doesn't do anything anymore. He leaves everything to me. He's got one man out in the yard and another man out in the forests, and those two make all the decisions. Oscar just wanders around talking to people. He goes down to the barbershop and listens to all the gossip. They've got a back room down there that nobody's supposed to know about, and those old men sit back there and play dominoes all afternoon, a penny a point. And Oscar thinks I don't know about it. So what would I do without you, Billy? How could I handle all this on my own?"

"I'd help you, Miriam," put in Malcolm. "I'd be glad to help."

"You're no help," returned Miriam. "I have to watch you every minute. I need Billy, working away downtown in his little office. I've got to have somebody to talk all this business over with. This is business I cain't think through all by myself. So, Billy, if Frances divorces you, I'll marry you myself. We aren't gone be letting you go, so you might as well get *that* out of your mind right now."

The first course was brought, and there was no more talk of Frances. In a low voice Miriam instructed Malcolm in the intricacies of eating Clams Casino and what to do with the shells.

. . .

Billy's great fear had been that he would be banished from the Caskeys if Frances declared their marriage finished. He had seen what Sister had done to Early. Billy had always considered himself married to the clan, as if the Caskeys were one great bride and Frances were only the ring-bearing representative. Miriam had reassured him that if worse came to worst and Frances removed that ring, Miriam would pick it up and place it on her own finger.

Armed with this thought, he returned to Perdido. Malcolm parked in front of Miriam's house and began unloading the bags. Billy went immediately to his own home and called out his wife's name.

Zaddie pushed open the screen door for him and held a finger to her lips.

"Is the baby asleep?" he asked.

"No," said Zaddie, "Miss Frances sick in the bed."

This did not tally with how he had imagined his homecoming; Billy hurried up the stairs. The door of his and Frances's bedroom was closed but he went in without knocking. The shades were drawn and the curtains closed; the room was nearly dark.

"Close the door!" cried Elinor. She was sitting in the mahogany rocker at the side of the bed. Billy pushed the door shut behind him.

In the darkness, he could scarcely make out his wife in the bed. Despite the warmth of the evening, she lay under thick covers. She shifted and slid on the sheets.

"Hey, Billy," Frances murmured.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked. "Zaddie said you were sick."

"Oh, I'm all right," she replied in a weak voice. "I'm just not feeling well right now."

"Elinor, what's wrong with her?"

"My baby's just not up to par," replied Elinor. "She'll be all right. She missed you. Did you and Miriam get everything done all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Billy absently. "What does the doctor say?"

"Nothing," replied Frances. "I don't need any doctor, I just need a little rest. I got tired out while you were gone, Billy. I need to stay in bed for a

while, that's all. Listen, I hope you don't mind, but we moved some of your things into the front room. It's hard for me to sleep right now, and I cain't have anybody else in the bed with me. I'll be all right in a couple of days. Then we'll move everything right back in. I missed you a lot."

There was, in Frances's voice, something soft and loving. It had been so long since Billy had heard her speak so, that he nearly wept from the surprise and tenderness of it.

"Sure, sure, and I missed you."

"Billy," said Elinor, "why don't you go unpack? Frances is going to try to go to sleep now."

"Bye, Billy," said Frances weakly. "I sure am glad you're back."

"I'm just gone be in the next room, honey," Billy assured her. "You call and I'll hear you."

Elinor rose from her chair and saw Billy out into the hallway.

"Is she really all right?" he whispered.

Elinor smiled and nodded. "She'll be fine in a day or two."

. . .

Elinor walked back into the bedroom.

"Is he gone?" Frances asked in a whisper.

"Well, he's not *gone,"* replied Elinor. "He's just in the next room. And I am still mad at you, darling."

"Mama, I told you, I couldn't help it!"

"You could have. You know better than to stay in that water as long as you did. You worried me to death. Now see what happened?"

"I didn't know it would happen."

"I told you, darling, over and over again, you can't stay in the Perdido for more than a few hours."

"I am stifling, Mama," said Frances, pushing back the covers. Her powerful gray legs slipped wetly around on the sheets, and her webbed gray feet stretched and waggled now that they were no longer confined beneath the heavy blankets. Frances turned a little, and her powerful gray tail slipped over the side of the bed and dangled toward the floor.

Chapter 70

The Fortune

Billy assumed that Elinor had had a long talk with his wife, for after this brief illness when she was confined for two days to her bed and he was wholly excluded from the room and her presence, Frances was suddenly better—and much more like the Frances he married. She evidently was making an effort to pay more attention to him and Lilah. Her manner was no longer distracted. Her old shy smile returned sometimes. Billy returned to his wife's bed.

Her daily swims in the Perdido continued, but they only lasted about an hour. And she—and Elinor and Zaddie—no longer made a secret of them. One day Oscar said to Billy, "When Elinor and I were first married, Elinor swam in the Perdido every day. Mama didn't take to that. In fact, no one in town took to that. But Elinor went ahead and did it, and I didn't say a word except, 'Elinor, did you have a good swim today?' And Billy, maybe that's what you should say to Frances. 'Cause whether you like it or not, that's what Frances is gone do."

Billy did not oppose the daily swims. It gradually became known in the town that Frances Bronze swam in that dangerous current just as her mother had many years before. People shook their heads and wondered at it, but the Caskeys were rich. They could do whatever they wanted.

Billy told himself that he should be satisfied now; every couple goes through a period of adjustment in marriage. His and Frances's adjustment hadn't been as wracking or as protracted as some he knew of. Yet Billy was pricked with the uneasy feeling that this Frances Caskey now sharing his bed wasn't the Frances Caskey he had married. It seemed to him that she was *acting* the part of a wife and mother. Her care of Lilah appeared to come only with conscious thought, as if she were consulting a spiral notebook with lists of things to be done in the proper raising of a child. Her timidly amorous advances to him in bed at night might have been approved by a printed calendar distributed by pharmacists. It was as if her very conversation and moods were calculated to provide the verisimilitude of normality.

There were times that Billy felt he *did* see the true Frances. Once when he returned home in the middle of the day to get some papers from Elinor he met his wife in the lower hallway. The day was chilly, but she was barefooted, bareheaded, and naked beneath her loosely gathered robe, having just come in from her swim. When he first saw her, she was smiling and radiant. But the smile faded the moment she glimpsed him in the dimness of the corridor.

On some evenings, when Billy and Oscar and other members of the family sat talking on the upstairs screened-in porch, he'd look through the window of his and Frances's room and see Frances seated before the vanity with Elinor behind her, softly brushing and arranging her daughter's hair. Their voices were low and musical, but Billy never learned of their conversations.

Billy became so accustomed to the new Frances that he began to forget the old one. Though he was working constantly with Miriam, they never said anything further about their conversation in Houston during which Miriam had told Billy she would marry him if Frances divorced him. Billy seemed to have two wives, the two Caskey sisters: Frances, who remained at home, raised his child, and saw to his clothes and lay in bed beside him at night, and Miriam, who talked to him on the telephone half a dozen times a day and made business trips with him, shared his work, and his financial interests. Neither woman was jealous of the prerogatives of the other. Billy wondered if this didn't represent perfection in a man's life, and concluded, as the months passed, that it did.

. . .

Late in October 1948, oil rig machinery was brought from Texas to Pensacola by boat, and taken by barge up the Perdido River. South of Gavin Pond Farm, as Elinor had showed Miriam more than a year ago, the swampland owned by the Caskeys was separated from the river by only a thin line of marsh grass and cypress. During times of heavy rainfall, these hammocks were overwhelmed and the swamp poured its excess water directly into the river. With great difficulty and the assistance of more than a hundred cursing, mosquito-bitten roustabouts imported from Louisiana, the machinery was taken into the interior of the swamp to an island that Miriam guaranteed—with Elinor's assurance—was never inundated. Drilling on the first well was begun in January 1949. Oil was struck within the week.

A second well, sunk a quarter of a mile away and nearer to Gavin Pond Farm, struck oil on the third day.

The oil industry was astonished. Miriam was not a geologist. Miriam was not even experienced in the business. But her drilling maps were uncannily accurate. When questioned, Miriam only smiled and said, "I *always* know what I'm doing." She never told that *her* directions came from Elinor.

Grace and Lucille were proud of the flares of burning gas that illuminated their nighttime sky to the south, visible out their bedroom window and from their bed. Not mincing words, Grace said, "You know what that means, Lucille? That means money, money, money, money, money."

A channel was cleared through the swamp to allow access for small barges that collected the oil that was pumped out. This was easier, it was thought, than building a causeway through the swamp and taking the oil out by truck. A third and then a fourth well were drilled from platforms built in the middle of the swamp. There was now no doubt in anyone's mind that these would strike oil as well.

Perdido watched all these events with astonishment. Oil lay under Texas and Oklahoma and Louisiana. It did not lie under Alabama and Florida. It was one thing for Grace and Lucille to set up a windmill on Gavin Pond Farm, but another thing altogether for them to sink an oil well on their property.

When the machinery-laden barges, the roustabouts, the engineers and foremen, the dredgers, the mechanics, the cooks, and all the other assorted hangers-on began to arrive in Escambia County, Florida, it was big news throughout the Alabama and Florida panhandles. Oil had been discovered here. And oil, everyone knew, was more valuable than cattle, pecans, and long-leaf yellow pine. Oil could make a man rich, if he happened to own land on which it was found. One didn't have to wait thirty years for a pecan tree to grow to maturity. One didn't have to buy feed for cattle. One didn't have to plant seedlings in careful rows and worry about insects and forest fires. One simply signed a piece of paper, and then deposited checks drawn on Texas banks. Oil was the preferred wealth of the lazy man. A man with oil money was respected by his neighbors in a way that a man with hard-earned and hard-kept money was not.

In two weeks, the small amount of available property along either side of the Perdido River from the town of Perdido itself all the way south to the Gulf of Mexico quintupled in price. The federal government owned much of the land on the eastern bank of the river. The western bank was forest land, and over half was owned by the Caskeys. Some farmers fortunate enough to own little homesteads of fifty or sixty acres sold them for forty or fifty thousand dollars, and immediately moved into Bay Minette or Foley and basked in their liberation from the obstinate Baldwin County soil. Other farmers decided to hold on to their farms. If the price of land had quintupled in two weeks, what might it not do in six weeks or a year?

. . .

Miriam was well regarded by her family. What pleased the Caskeys was not that she had persuaded Texas National Oil to bring their men and their machinery to that godforsaken swamp twenty miles from nowhere and to give the Caskeys money for what would have been no good to anybody anyhow, but rather that she had taken care—before any of this other came about—to make sure that the proceeds would be evenly distributed among the members of the family. The swampland was held in common by the Caskeys: that was why so many signatures were required and why so many power-of-attorney cards were on file with the bank and lawyers. When the oil started flowing, Billy distributed checks. Everyone in the family—Billy and Miriam included—was astonished by the size of those drafts. By the autumn of 1949, when the wells had been pumped only nine months, the Caskeys' income was greater from leasing royalties than it was from the entire profit of the mills.

"I don't know why we're working at all," Oscar said, staring at an enormous check. "We could close down the mill and sit back and relax."

"And put six hundred people out of work," Miriam pointed out. "And make us all lazy and fat."

"I'm lazy and fat already," her father argued.

Miriam made no reply.

After receiving the checks from Billy, the Caskeys always just endorsed them and handed them back. "What are we supposed to *do* with money like that?" Queenie demanded. "I couldn't spend all that money if I was to work seven days a week at it. Billy, you go on and invest it somewhere."

Billy laughed. “Queenie, if I invest it, you’re just going to make more.”

“All right,” said Queenie, “so don’t tell me about it. Just go ahead and do it.”

As the oil wells in the swamp continued to pump, and as other wells were sunk, the Caskeys grew accustomed to the new wealth, though they never quite grasped the meaning of such overweening prosperity. Queenie, for instance, judged all sums as fractions or multiples of twenty-nine dollars, which had been the cost, in 1943, of a new dress. A check for one hundred sixteen thousand dollars would purchase four thousand new dresses, and Queenie couldn’t even begin to imagine closets to hold such a wardrobe as that. The limit of her imagination was a new car every year; anything beyond that exhausted her mind.

Miriam continued to run the mill, and Miriam and Billy together guided the Caskeys through the machinations of the oil companies and the exploitation of the swamp. There were trips now not only to Houston, but to New Orleans, Atlanta, and New York as well—sometimes by airplane. The Caskeys were rich, and their investments became more complicated. In whatever city Miriam visited, she always picked up some bijou made of diamonds, pearls, or colored gems to put in one of her safety-deposit boxes —she now had seven altogether. But even when she and Billy went out to a nightclub together on one of their trips, she never wore any jewels except the diamond bobs that had belonged to Mary-Love.

In the first years of this new financial grandeur, the Caskeys did not change the way Perdido thought they might. The greatest difference was in Oscar Caskey, who gave up his work at the mill. He ceased to take any interest whatsoever in the business except for the maintenance of the forests themselves. He still loved the smell of growing pine, he said. When Lake Pinchona opened a nine-hole golf course, Oscar took up the game, and played eighteen, twenty seven, or even thirty-six holes every afternoon. He soon lost the fat he had gained in the past few years. He slept later in the mornings, and after his shave in the barbershop, he sometimes lingered around the back room of the establishment in hope of getting up a domino game. Miriam did not even pretend that he was needed at the mill. When she wanted his advice or opinion, she asked for it, but said otherwise, “Go on Oscar, do what you like, we’ll get along here just fine.”

Oscar heard of a fine golf course over near Tallahassee and had Bray drive him over early one morning. He made up a foursome in the clubhouse and played all afternoon. The following week he returned and stayed for three days, playing morning and afternoon, this time taking Malcolm along for company. In time Oscar heard of other courses, some even farther away than Tallahassee, but he visited them anyway. Bray always drove him, and always in the back seat was the folded-up feather mattress he had so much missed the night he had been forced to spend out at Gavin Pond Farm. Oscar was rich and set in his ways. He loved to travel; he never went without his bed.

Elinor refused to go with him. She didn't like to be away from Perdido, she said. She couldn't bear leaving Frances and Lilah alone. Elinor and Frances were always in each other's company—except during Frances's daily swim in the Perdido.

Increased wealth did nothing to improve Sister's temper. She still kept to her bed. While originally the bed had been an excuse to get away from Early, Early had now become an excuse to remain in the bed. It no longer mattered that at first her contention that she could not walk had been a mere falsehood to keep her safe from Early Haskew; Sister's legs had withered. Now she most definitely could *not* walk, and she smugly considered her husband's loneliness in Mobile with all the day lilies in the back yard.

Also, at the same time, for lack of anything better to occupy herself with, Sister picked a fight with Ivey Sapp. She accused Ivey of crippling her with the contents of the blue bottle she had swallowed on the night that Early Haskew had come to take her away. Ivey said in reply, "You know what was in that bottle, Sister. You know it made you blind—that's all. You couldn't see and you fell down the stairs. And next morning you could see fine again. Don't try and tell me I had anything to do with your legs!" But Sister maintained her stance, and Ivey no more went upstairs. Queenie was needed all the more then.

Queenie was sixty, but lively and proud of her family. She rather wondered at her good fortune. There had been a time not so long ago when it had seemed that she had lost all three of her children to distance, disaster, or disappointment. Danjo was firmly entrenched in his castle in Germany now, that was true. But she had Malcolm to take up his place at the table. And here was she, possessing more money than she had ever dreamed it possible for any one human being to be possessed of, able to give Malcolm

and Lucille cars and new clothes and little trips and big trips—anything in the world, in fact, that they wanted or would make them happy. Was there ever an aging woman who was happier than Queenie Strickland?

Malcolm was the Caskeys' workhorse, commanded to do many tasks, which he performed with ever-increasing facility. And it was apparent to everyone that Malcolm was in love with Miriam. Once, in her office at the mill, Malcolm looked up from some figures he was totaling for her, and said, "Miriam, you want to get married?"

"To who?" Miriam asked, *not* looking up.

"To me," said Malcolm.

"Why you want to get married to me?"

"I don't know. Just 'cause, I guess."

"No," said Miriam. "If we got married, where would we live? We couldn't live with Queenie. She grates on my nerves, always has. And you couldn't live with me, 'cause you grate on Sister's nerves. Sister wouldn't even let me bring you in the house. That's why we cain't get married."

This odd refusal of marriage made sense to Malcolm, and he never raised the subject again. He'd wait for Queenie—or for Sister—to die.

Roxie, who had remained with Queenie after James's death, died. Her fifty-year-old daughter, Reta, who remembered helping Miss Elinor scrub James's floor after the flood of 1919, came to Queenie's assistance. At Gavin Pond Farm, Sammy Sapp had a little brother and a little sister who could pick up pecans and put them in a sack before they could properly walk. Ivey and Zaddie had a fight in 1950—about what, no one knew—and by 1954, though they continued to work in Elinor's kitchen together every day of the year, they still did not speak to each other. Bray's eyes failed, and his job as chauffeur was handed over to a younger man, the husband of yet another of the Sapp daughters.

At Gavin Pond Farm, Grace and Lucille got along as well as they ever had, and Tommy Lee was growing up in the constant company of Sammy Sapp, Luvadia's boy. Grace put Tommy Lee on the tractor for the first time when he was four, and showed him how to steer. Because his feet wouldn't reach the pedals, she placed a large rock on the accelerator and allowed him to till a recently cleared field. With the money coming in from the oil, Grace bought two of the best bulls in the country and opened a stud service. She built two barns, a stable, and a silo. And she doubled the size of the house with the addition of a living room, three bedrooms, two baths, and a

playroom for Tommy Lee. She bought horses for herself and Lucille and a pony for Tommy Lee. She had a catfish pond scooped out of the earth and graveled the road from the Babylon highway. They began to entertain, and Thanksgiving for the Caskeys was held out at the farm instead of at Elinor's. Grace and Lucille were hosts of a vast New Year's Eve party. They invited everybody they knew from Perdido, Babylon, and Pensacola. Grace had a houseboat specially constructed for her in Pensacola which she moored on the bank of the Perdido and where she and Lucille went when they wanted to be alone. Grace's great itch remained the acquisition of land, and she unmercifully badgered owners of property next to the farm. With the backup of ever-increasing oil revenues, her offers increased steadily until they were irresistible, and every year Gavin Pond Farm's fences lengthened. By 1955 it was the largest private landholding in the Florida panhandle.

. . .

What was good for the Caskeys was good for the entire area. Now oil companies began to look at the area on both banks of the Perdido. Other wells were drilled, some on Caskey property. More than half struck oil; *more* money poured into the region.

With the prosperity of the Caskey mills and oil enterprises the population of Perdido doubled to more than five thousand. The Caskeys bought the pecan orchard and cattle pasture across the road from their houses so that it could not be built upon. The town expanded south along both banks of the Perdido and west into the pine forest. The Caskeys relinquished some of their land near the town for building. More shops opened downtown, and their quality rivaled those in Pensacola and Mobile. Perdido society, with more money in its pocket, began to dress up. Little parties were arranged to go to Mobile for the evening. Rented railroad cars transported carousers to the Auburn-Alabama game in the fall. Beach houses were erected at Destin or Gulf Shores. Lake Pinchona became the Perdido Country Club. With money lent at low interest by Oscar, the country club added another nine holes to its golf course.

The town seemed overrun with children. The grammar school expanded with funds donated by the Caskeys. A municipal swimming pool was installed next to the high school, and now no one in Perdido need be tempted to swim in the Perdido or the Blackwater. There was even talk of repairing the levee, which had developed visible cracks and had eroded

away in a few places, although no one remembered the last time the water had been high enough to threaten the town. In recent years the rivers behind their walls of clay had been placid, and it seemed a waste of money to recondition the levees when two faces of the town hall clock didn't keep correct time and so many streets in Baptist Bottom were not paved.

Miriam was revered in Perdido for having brought prosperity to the area. In Babylon and other towns of Escambia County, Florida, Grace was given the credit. Whenever she went to the seed and feed store in Babylon she was besieged. Men thanked her for what she had done; men asked her for the names of the top people at Texas National Oil; men offered to sell her their land for sums that staggered her. She liked these men and wished them success; her great fortune made her want the same for others.

One day in the store Grace ran into a farmer she had known for several years. He was a hard-working churchgoer. His wife had died of pneumonia two years back and he had always known bad luck. He said to her, "Well, Miz Caskey, you know where my place is, my boy and I have about two hundred acres right down there between Cantonement and Muscogee. We raise a little soybean, raise a little corn. Make a little money when there's rain, lose a little money when there's not. Well, my boy and me was standing out in the field one day, saw this machinery on the other side of the fence—not our property—talked to the men there, found out they was looking for oil. And they was finding it! So we just took down our fence there, and we said: 'Y'all come on through!' And they did, and they found oil. I wasn't surprised. Somebody come up to my boy yesterday and says, 'What's the soybean crop gone be like this year?' And my boy says, 'Hell, I don't know why you're asking me—we don't raise soybean no more. We got machinery on our land, and we don't plant soybean, 'cause the roots might go down and disturb the machinery.' You don't hardly make money on soybean anyway. We raise oil now. Not hardly no comparison between the two, so far as money goes. We don't even have to run that machinery. All we have to do is slit open them checks every month. We have bought us two pick-'em-up trucks. Drove up to Atmore to get 'em, and we had our choice so we bought two of 'em that look just alike. That damn oil is flowing like an artesian well..."

The Caskeys owned one thousand times this farmer's two hundred acres of oil-rich land.

Chapter 71

Legacies

Everyone in town knew that a strangeness had grown between Frances Bronze and her husband Billy. Some said Billy was having an affair with his sister-in-law Miriam. Those who knew the Caskeys better discounted this information on three counts. First of all: “Billy wouldn’t do it.” He was upright, God-fearing, and wholly devoted to the Caskey family; he would never create a situation so destructive to family interests. The second argument was: “Miriam wouldn’t do it.” No one had ever known Miriam to be interested in anything but making money, buying jewelry, and speaking her mind without a moment’s thought about consequences. So far as anyone had ever seen, Miriam had no interest in men. Those trips to Texas were strictly business, and besides, didn’t Malcolm Strickland always go along? The third argument went: “Elinor wouldn’t have allowed it.” Everyone knew how deeply Elinor loved her daughter, knew how faithfully she had nursed Frances through her dreadful childhood illnesses, and knew that Elinor was fiercely protective of Frances. If Elinor had thought there was anything between Billy and Miriam she would have put a stop to it instantly.

Frances no longer denied the feelings that had taken root in her. She was devoted to “her other daughter,” Nerita. She lived for those hours spent in the water. Recognition only increased these feelings. Oscar, though distracted with thoughts of golf and travel, noticed his daughter’s remoteness. Frances had withdrawn, not only from Billy, but from them all. “Talk to her, Elinor,” Oscar said. “Talk to her sometime when I’m not here.”

Oscar was gone somewhere every week it seemed, at one golf course or another; and he preferred those far away, in landscapes different from those of the Alabama panhandle. Billy was absent often, too, on business. When the women were left alone, their lives were quiet and circumscribed and formal. Elinor now insisted that the family dress for dinner at her home. Their enlarged fortune and expanding importance in the region required it, she said. Even Oscar, though it chafed, put on a coat and tie before he sat down at the table. Elinor invariably wore the black pearls.

Late in May 1956, Oscar was in Raleigh, North Carolina, visiting friends and the three excellent courses in the area. Miriam and Billy and Malcolm were in New Orleans. Queenie had accompanied Grace and Lucille to a cattle auction in Georgia. Sister took her meals alone. Elinor, Frances, and Lilah ate dinner in splendor in the dining room, waited on by Zaddie in a starched black uniform.

Nine-year-old Lilah chatted with her grandmother, telling her about the end of the school year and the party that was planned for the country club and what she wanted to do during the summer. Frances sat by, quietly eating, not exactly ignoring her daughter, but apparently oblivious to her. After dessert, Elinor said to Lilah, "Darling, why don't you go upstairs for a little while? Your mama and I need to do a little talking."

Lilah, on the condition that Elinor allow her to sit at her vanity and try on her jewelry, assented.

"Mama?" the child asked, turning to Frances.

Frances looked up suddenly. "What, dear?"

"Mama," said Lilah slowly, with the air of imparting a lesson to a backward child, "may I be excused?"

"Yes, of course," said Frances absently.

After Lilah had left the room, Elinor called in Zaddie. "Bring us some more coffee, Zaddie, and then close the doors, please." Zaddie did so.

Elinor sat silent and erect at the head of the table, fingering the black pearls gleaming dimly in the candlelight. Frances also sat quietly, her head slightly averted, gazing through the gauze curtains at the deep blackness of the pine forest beyond the edge of the property. A wind had sprung up in the last hour, and it was laden with moisture, portending heavy rain. The curtains blew about and the candles guttered.

"Mama?" said Frances, without concern. "What did you want to talk about?"

"You're unhappy," said Elinor simply. "It hurts me to see you unhappy. It hurts me very much."

Frances toyed with her coffee spoon, moving it slowly around the rim of her cup with its cooling, untasted coffee. "Yes," said Frances at last, "I am unhappy, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know who I am," said Frances quickly, and then glanced at her mother with surprise.

“What do you mean—*who you are?”*

“I feel like I’m losing touch,” said Frances.

“With Billy?”

“With everything,” returned Frances solemnly. “With Billy, with Lilah, with Daddy—with this house, with Perdido and money and clothes. With just about everything.”

“With me?” asked Elinor.

Frances smiled, reached out and squeezed her mother’s hand on the cut-work linen tablecloth.

“No,” whispered Frances, “not with you. Everything is—I don’t know how to put this, Mama—*vague*, like I’m going blind or something. Fuzzy. Pale. And I hear the same way, too—fuzzy. That’s why everything has to be said to me twice before I say anything back. At first I thought maybe I should go see the doctor...”

Elinor waved this away.

“I know,” said Frances. “Besides, it’s not *everything* that’s so vague to me. See, *you’re* not. I see you, and I hear you talk—except when you’re talking to Billy or Daddy or Lilah or somebody—and you’re just the way you always were.”

“What do you think it is?” asked Elinor.

“I know what it is,” returned Frances. “And you do, too.”

Elinor nodded.

“You didn’t tell me about this part,” said Frances.

“I didn’t know about it,” said Elinor. “I didn’t know it would happen.”

Frances smiled wanly. “But it has. All this”—she waved her hand about the dining room, as if she meant it to encompass all of her life—“is fading, Mama. And you know what’s become real?”

“Nerita?”

Frances nodded. “That’s my real life, the time I spend with her.” Frances looked up at the ceiling. “Lilah—she’s not my little girl. She belongs to you much more than she does to me. Poor thing, I feel so sorry for her, because her real mama doesn’t love her the way she should. Lilah’s not my real little girl. My real little girl is out there in the Perdido. I worry about *her*. I think about *her.* You know why I never go off with Billy? You know why I never go off with Daddy? Because I couldn’t stand to be away from my little girl for a single day. Mama, I live for that hour in the water every afternoon.”

"I know you do."

"And you know what I've found out?"

"What?" asked Elinor apprehensively.

"That even that one hour a day is too much. It's harder and harder for me to change back. Sometimes I have to sit out on the edge of the river covering myself up with a blanket. One time Zaddie came out there looking for me, but I couldn't stand up because she would have seen. And soon, Mama, what's gone happen is that I won't be able to go out in the water for even five minutes without that change keeping on for longer and longer."

"And that's why you're unhappy."

Frances nodded. "What if I had to stop seeing Nerita? It would kill me. Oh, Mama, do you *know* how happy we are down there?"

Elinor nodded with a smile, and pushed away her coffee cup. "I've seen you. You are as happy with Nerita as I was with you. Darling, I love you! I love you so much! It *kills* me to see you like this."

"Then tell me what to do, Mama."

"I don't know what you can do."

"Then just tell me what's going to happen."

There was a sudden clap of thunder. A moment later, rain began to fall. Its scent invaded the room and the candles cowered beneath the dampness.

The rain fell so hard that Elinor had to raise her voice to be heard over it. "I don't know what's going to happen."

. . .

The rain continued throughout that evening. Frances and Elinor eventually went upstairs. They looked in on Lilah, who sat contented at the vanity, clipping diamond earrings to her ears.

"You should have been Miriam's little girl," laughed Frances, "not mine. Someday you should get Miriam to open one of her safety-deposit boxes for you."

"I've already asked her," said Lilah, expertly clasping a gold necklace at the back of her neck. "Are y'all still talking?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Elinor. "Do you mind?"

"Do I have to get out?"

"No," said Elinor. "We'll go across the hall."

Frances sat at *her* vanity, and Elinor took down her daughter's hair and began to brush it. The rain blew through the open window, soaking the curtains and dripping onto the carpet.

“Do you want me to close that?” Elinor asked.

Frances shrugged and was silent. She seemed lost in her own thoughts as her head was tugged this way and that by Elinor’s stern movements with the brush.

At last, Frances looked up at her mother’s reflection in the mirror. “Mama,” said Frances softly, “what if I went back?”

“Back?” Elinor echoed. The arm holding the brush trembled and dropped to her side.

“Went back forever,” Frances went on.

“It wouldn’t be *going back*, exactly,” said Elinor cautiously. “Because you never really lived there.”

“Yes, but I could live there, couldn’t I?”

Elinor didn’t answer this directly. “What about Billy?”

Frances smiled. “Would you throw him out?”

“Of course not. We all love Billy.”

“Then Billy will be fine. Billy didn’t want to marry *me*, he just wanted to marry this family. If you let him stay on, he’d be happy. Maybe Miriam would marry him,” Frances mused.

“What about Oscar? What about Lilah?” demanded Elinor, going to the window and slamming it down in its sash.

“Daddy will miss me,” Frances conceded. “But Lilah won’t. I’ll leave her my jewels.” Frances flipped open the top of her jewelry case and plunged her fingers in. She withdrew her hand slowly. A bracelet and a single earring slipped to the carpet, but Frances apparently didn’t notice.

“What about *me?”* Elinor asked at last.

“Mama,” laughed Frances, “you can *visit.”*

Elinor looked around the room. “Wouldn’t you miss everybody? Wouldn’t you miss everything you’ve always had? What if you got down there and didn’t like it, didn’t like the Perdido for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week?”

“Mama,” said Frances, following her mother’s gaze about the room, “this has been my room for thirty-five years, but it just doesn’t feel like home. That river does.”

Elinor sat down on the edge of her daughter’s bed. “When would you go?” she asked.

Frances glanced out the window. Lightning struck nearby and illuminated the tops of the water oaks in the sandy yards.

“Tonight,” said Frances. “Why not tonight?” She rose from the vanity. “Unhook me, Mama,” she said, with obvious excitement. “Help me undress.”

“You can’t—”

“Tonight is perfect,” said Frances. “I’ll just wait till Lilah is in bed.”

“What will I tell Billy, what will—”

“Tell everybody I drowned.” Frances shrugged. “Everybody in Perdido has been expecting it for years.” She walked to the window and raised it. She thrust her head out into the stormy night. Lightning exploded and thunder shook the house. Frances withdrew her head. Her hair was soaked, and rain streamed down her face.

“That hit the levee!” she laughed. “I saw it strike!”

She pulled off her earrings and dropped them on the vanity.

“All this stuff goes to Lilah. She’ll like it. I never did. Grace is about my size. Let her go through my closet. Everything else goes to the church in Baptist Bottom.”

Frances smiled as she said all this; her eyes sparkled.

Lilah pushed open the door of the room. “It’s really coming down,” she said. “I closed all the windows up here.”

She glanced with disapproval at the open window and the puddle of water forming on the edge of the carpet.

“Mama,” she said reproachfully, “didn’t you even *notice?”*

Frances only laughed. She threw herself down on the bench before the vanity and called Lilah over to her. Lilah edged closer.

Frances reached out and grabbed Lilah. She hugged her and laughed.

“Mama!” protested the little girl, who had rarely been embraced by her mother.

Elinor sat glumly on the edge of the bed and stared at her daughter. Her glance was not lost on Lilah.

“Mama, are you all right?” the girl asked cautiously, drawing back from her mother.

Frances grinned, swept up the earrings she had taken off, and clipped them to Lilah’s ears.

“Ouch!” cried Lilah.

“They’re yours!”

Lilah drew in her breath sharply, and held it. Swiveling around she looked at her grandmother with an expression that said, *Can I keep them?*

Elinor nodded yes.

Frances laughed again, picked up the entire jewelry box and thrust it into her daughter's hands.

"You want these, too?"

Lilah backed away.

Frances shrugged, laughed, and stood up. She waved her arms before her. "Go to bed, go to bed! It's late!"

In mute wonder, with her hands over the emerald bobs on her ears, Lilah backed out of her mother's bedroom. She ran across the hall to her bedroom and slammed the door shut.

. . .

The storm abated for a bit, then returned with greater force. Perdido closed its windows, pulled its curtains drawn, and turned up the volume on its television sets. An oak sapling on the Baptist Bottom levee was struck with lightning and burst into flames, burning a few seconds before the torrential rain snuffed it out like an ignited match plunged into a cistern full of water.

At eleven o'clock, Perdido went to its windows, looked out, and wondered that the storm didn't stop. Small trenches appeared in the earth around foundations, dug by the cascade of water falling from roofs. Gutters were overwhelmed. Perdido felt the first twinges of uneasiness over the fact that, in three decades, no municipal funds had been spent on the maintenance of the levees. The rivers would no doubt rise.

Children trembled in their beds, bracing for the next burst of thunder. With flashlights their parents searched out leaks, wearily placing buckets and pans beneath them.

Elinor's house was quiet. Lilah was asleep. Zaddie lay in bed reading old copies of *Coronet* and listening as the rain beat against the low sloping roof of the lattice.

At the very peak of the storm, with lightning crackling across the sky for long seconds, sharp blasts of thunder lasting for what seemed like minutes, and rain falling in heavy sheets, two figures appeared on the front porch of the Caskey mansion at the edge of the town. No one saw them.

Frances was clad in a loose dark robe. Her mother wore a long dark raincoat. Both women were barefoot.

Frances looked at her mother for a moment. Then she leaned forward and threw her arms about Elinor. She squeezed tightly and Elinor squeezed back.

Frances stepped through the veil of black water that poured thunderously from the roof of the house.

She paused at the foot of the steps and looked back up.

Elinor stepped boldly through the curtain of water, descended the steps, and grasped her daughter's hand.

Together, they made their way around the house and into the shadow and protection of the water oaks. Neither glanced at the lighted window of Sister's room next door, as they walked slowly toward the levee. In such darkness and heavy rain as this, they were confident they'd never be seen. They mounted the steps behind Queenie's house, stood for a few moments on the top of the clay embankment, and gazed down into the swiftly flowing black waters of the Perdido, its surface a wide dark ribbon of turbulence.

Frances again embraced her mother. When she drew away, Elinor plucked the robe from her daughter's shoulders and allowed it to fall in the red mud atop the levee. Frances stood naked.

Frances glanced once more at her mother, saying nothing. She did not touch her, but stepped to the side of the levee that sloped down to the river, then went sliding down past blackberry brambles, past saplings, past broken bottles and clumps of kudzu roots till she reached the bottom.

Elinor peered down. An enormous bolt of lightning illuminated the entire sky, and Elinor saw her daughter descend into the water. Before she went completely under, Frances raised one hand in brief farewell.

Elinor remained at the top of the levee for half an hour. The lightning and thunder had moved northward, but the rain was still heavy. The night was darker. Finally she walked slowly down the concrete steps and across the yard. After bathing each foot in the curtain of water falling from the roof of the house, she went inside and roused Zaddie to tell her of Frances's drowning in the night water of the Perdido.

VI: Rain

Chapter 72

The Engagement

Perhaps they were only that: two old women gossiping, gossiping forever in a back bedroom of an old house in a remote corner of Alabama. In 1958 Sister Haskew was sixty-four-years-old, crippled, bed-ridden, querulous, weak, dependent, and demanding. Queenie Strickland was sixty-six, fat, happy, bustling, devoted, and cheerful. Both women were immensely rich, and neither one of them ever gave a second thought to the money they possessed. Queenie was Sister's slave and spy. Queenie fetched and carried. Queenie left her own house, next door, promptly at six fifty-five in order to bring Sister's breakfast tray to her at seven o'clock every morning, and at seven o'clock every evening, Queenie carried Sister's supper tray down to Ivey's darkened kitchen, and dropped the dishes on the counter with a clatter and a sigh. Sister would never have allowed Queenie away from her bedside at all had it not been for Sister's insatiable curiosity about the goings-on of the town, the mill, and her own family. Queenie was allowed to play bridge, go shopping, drive out to her daughter Lucille's farm, and eat dinner next door at Elinor's, only because when she returned to Sister's musty, close, cluttered bedroom, she would be able to relate to Sister all that had been done and everything that had been said. Sister would take these random bits of information and draw wild conclusions and predictions, and invariably Queenie said, "Sister, you are wrong, that's not gone happen." And indeed, Sister's predictions never did come true, not a single one of them. Sister had been so long removed from society that she had almost forgot how it worked. Queenie was a faithful reporter, but Sister's analysis was never correct.

The house in which Sister and Miriam lived had altered its whole character in the past dozen years. When Mary-Love was alive, and during Miriam's adolescence, the place had seemed suffused with a kind of vitality bred—some would say—of meanness, but perhaps really only of energetic purpose. It had firmly stood its ground between Elinor's much larger residence on one side, and James Caskey's more genteel home on the other. Now something in its aspect, with the porches and all the first-floor windows hidden behind azaleas and camellias that had been allowed to

grow unchecked, suggested that the house was drawing in upon itself, that it no longer set itself up in any sort of competition with its neighbors, that it wished to retire from the fray. Inside it smelled of age. The furniture was still exactly as it had been on the day of Mary-Love Caskey's death twenty-two years before. This was not out of reverence for the dead woman, but because for one thing Miriam didn't care enough to want to change it, and for another, Sister liked to be reminded as often as possible—although she would never admit it, even to herself—that Mary-Love was, after all, dead. Ivey Sapp was an old woman, too, as old as Queenie, and she had buried Bray in the spring of 1957. She now had Melva, a granddaughter of James's cook, Roxie, to help her. Ivey was fatter even than Queenie, and did nothing but sit in the kitchen all day listening to the radio and giving directions to Melva; she would bestir herself only to cook the few dishes that Sister would eat.

Sister had lain so many years in bed that the entire house smelled of her and her infirmity, a pale powdery lavender sweetness like the herbs used by the Egyptians to fill the cavity of an eviscerated corpse. A person of delicate temperament might have gone mad in that place without ever realizing why. Miriam Caskey, thirty-seven now, was of a temperament robust enough to withstand the fragility of the atmosphere in which she slept every night, though perhaps the air in her room, the door of which she made sure was kept carefully shut all day, was not so sickly.

Though Early Haskew had never returned for Sister, she declared that she could not rest comfortably at night until Miriam had double-checked the locks on all the downstairs doors and windows. "That man will climb through to get at me," Sister constantly declaimed. "That man will raise ladders against the side of the house and peer at me through the window." Miriam had given up arguing that Early, wherever he was, was sixty-four years old, probably very fat, and unlikely to be inclined toward feats of athletic prowess.

Sister and Miriam weren't close. Miriam could not forget that Sister's infirmity, though real enough now, had begun in fakery. After her fall down the stairs, occasioned by her temporary blindness, Sister had taken to bed on account of a supposed weakness in her legs. And in order to avoid her husband, she had kept to that bed, willing her legs to wither so that Early would never have the opportunity to spirit her away from her cherished home. Miriam could not bring herself to cater to a woman who had

deliberately crippled herself. And Sister, for her part, felt that Miriam spent too much time with the mill and the Caskey oil business and not enough time with her. Sister said to Queenie, "I'm rich, you know that? I've got so much money I don't have the first idea what to do with it. And you know who it's going to? Every penny goes to Miriam. I've told her so. And how does Miriam treat me? She treats me like I'm a poor cousin."

"I used to be a poor cousin," Queenie pointed out.

"Exactly," said Sister, nodding her head, "and Miriam treats me the way that Mama and everybody else in the family used to treat you. Like I was a no-class, no-account sponger."

This speech startled Queenie, not because it was rude—which it certainly was—but rather because it sounded very much like something Mary-Love Caskey herself might have said. It set Queenie to thinking, and she told herself that she would pay more attention to Sister's manner in the future. Queenie watched, and Queenie listened, and Queenie concluded that Sister was growing more and more like her dead mother.

One day after church, in early fall of 1958, Queenie stopped Miriam outside in the yard, and said, "Miriam, have you noticed something about Sister?"

"You mean that she gets more demanding every day?" The Alabama summer still lingered, and Miriam stripped off her gloves with relief. She unpinned her hat, and shook out her hair.

"No," said Queenie with a little frown. "I mean the fact that she's getting more and more like Mary-Love every day."

Miriam smiled. "Haven't you realized before this? Haven't you seen the way she signs checks?"

"'Elvennia Haskew.' How else would she sign checks?" Queenie returned, surprised.

"No," said Miriam. She turned and went up the steps onto the porch and sat down in a wicker rocker; Queenie did the same. "About a year ago," Miriam continued, "I got called down to the bank because they said somebody was forging Sister's checks. So I went down there, and looked at the checks that had come in. There was 'Elvennia Haskew' all right—but it was in Grandmama's handwriting." Miriam laughed. "My heart jumped, and I thought, 'Lord God, she's come back from the grave, and what are we gone do?' The *n*'s were the same, and the *a* at the end of the word. Just like Grandmama's. I came back here, and I said, 'Sister, why are you playing

games with your signature? You are upsetting the people down at the bank.' And Sister didn't even know what I was talking about. So I showed her her old signature, and then I showed her the one she had just put on that check, and she said, 'I don't see any difference.' I didn't say anything else. But you look sometime, get her to write something out for you—the handwriting is Grandmama's, stroke for stroke."

"You loved your grandmama," remarked Queenie, though the spirit of Miriam's remarks had suggested otherwise.

"I did," said Miriam. "I loved her very, very much. I've never loved anybody as much as I loved her. But thank God she's dead, and thank God she's never coming back. She ruled the roost back then. And right now I rule the roost. So it's just as well that she and I don't have to fight it out."

"If Mary-Love were alive," said Queenie, "she wouldn't be fighting with you. She'd still be fighting with Elinor. She'd leave you alone."

"Nope," said Miriam. "She'd think I was uppity, and she'd try to keep me down. Just like Sister is now. Sister thinks I'm uppity, running the mill the way I do. Never mind that I'm making money for all of us, I'm not paying enough attention to *her.* Not waiting on her hand and foot the way you do."

"I don't mind," said Queenie.

"I know you don't, but I would. And I'd never do it, either. Sister brought all this on herself, Queenie, you know she did. Sister fell down the stairs eleven years ago. She could have been up and around in a few weeks, but all these years later she is still making people wait on her, people that have better things to do with their lives. I love Sister. I was brought up to love Sister. I will love her until the minute she sinks down dead in those five feather mattresses and those seven damned pillows. But I'm never gone say, 'Sister, I'm sorry you're crippled,' or 'Sister, I'm sorry you're lonely up there.' And she knows better than to ask me."

Just then Lilah wandered over from next door. Miriam smiled and held out her hands to her eleven-year-old niece. Lilah came up the steps.

"Grandmama says dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes and come on over when you want."

Queenie, whose appetite had never faltered in all her gathering years, stood up immediately. "Coming?" she asked Miriam.

Lilah said quickly, "Miriam, will you take me upstairs and let me see your jewelry?"

“I’ll show you some,” said Miriam. “And I’ll let you try on a few things, too.” So Miriam and Lilah went into the house and Queenie walked across the sandy yard to Elinor’s, hoping to find something to nibble in the kitchen before they all sat down.

. . .

“Who’s that?” cried Sister, hearing the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

“It’s me!” called Miriam. “And Lilah!”

“Lilah, come speak to me!”

Lilah ran down the hall, leaned into Sister’s room, and impatiently cried, “Not yet! Miriam’s gone let me try on some of her jewelry.”

“You try it on and then you come down here and show it to me.”

Lilah hurried back to Miriam’s room. She feared she had missed what for her was the best part, the opening of the drawer, but she hadn’t. Miriam just stood before the dresser, smiling. “I’ll let you do it today,” she said to Lilah.

Lilah dropped to her knees and reverently pulled out the bottom drawer of the old dresser. In it were stacked nine jewelry boxes, each one of a different size, each of a different age, each of a different texture. To Lilah, they were as dissimilar as any nine persons waiting in line at the bank. And each one was filled with treasure.

“Which one do you want to look in?” asked Miriam.

Lilah pointed to the middle box in the right-hand stack. “This one,” she said.

Miriam took a small key from her pocket, and went to a peculiar little chest in the corner of the room. It was as tall as she and as narrow, and had a mirror on the door. Lilah loved this upright chest, for she had never seen one that was anything like it. Inside were a dozen narrow shelves, and on those shelves Miriam kept things no one else was allowed to see. On the top shelf were nothing but keys, hundreds and hundreds of keys that opened God and Miriam only knew what locks. Without hesitation Miriam withdrew a ring of tiny keys from the back, and unerringly inserted one into the lock of the chest that Lilah had chosen. The case opened instantly.

Inside were earrings, jumbled together: bobs in emeralds and bobs in rubies and diamonds; pearl drops in gold settings; tiny golden studs delicately fashioned in the shape of stars, and ships, and horses; fancy antique drops, the like of which Lilah had never known existed, massive

with filigreed metalwork and a variety of stones; chaste modern work of single black pearls. Pressing her hands into the box, she was stung with sharp clasps and pins and facets—but she felt a thrill to such pain. It seemed impossible that each piece she picked up had its mate somewhere in the welter of gems, but Miriam assured her that it was so. “I don’t buy single pieces,” Miriam said, “and I never lose anything, so they’re all there somewhere.”

“Don’t you want me to match them up for you?”

“Why bother?” asked Miriam. “We’d just put them right back in the box and they’d all get mixed together again. Besides, Queenie’s probably about to starve to death. Pick out a pair and try them on.”

Lilah’s ears weren’t pierced, so she had to find bobs. She found one of a square-cut massive red stone. “What is this?”

“Rhodolite. It’s from South Africa. I bought those on Fifth Avenue in New York in 1953.”

Miriam thrust her hand into the box, and in another second she was holding its mate. Lilah wasn’t even certain that Miriam had looked. She seemed to have found it by its *feel.* Miriam clapped the bobs on her niece’s ears. They were absurdly heavy, and dragged at the child’s lobes.

“How do they look?” cried Lilah, peering into the mirror.

“Very silly,” said Miriam. “Now go show Sister—and hurry! My stomach was growling all the way through the sermon this morning.”

“I know,” said Lilah, scampering out of the door. “I heard it.”

Lilah ran down the hall again and entered Sister’s room. She went up to Sister’s bedside and turned her head this way and that for the jewels to be admired.

“They are precious,” said Sister, “and so are you, darling.”

“Thank you.”

“Miriam never lets anybody but you try on her jewelry.”

“She’s got so much!” whispered Lilah.

“It’s a wonder we can afford to eat in this house,” said Sister severely, “with what Miriam spends on that junk.”

“It’s not junk!”

“It is when she doesn’t wear it! That’s probably the first time those things have ever been worn since she bought them.”

“I have to take them off,” said Lilah with a sigh.

“Lilah!” Miriam called from the hall. “We got to get going!”

Lilah started to turn away, but Sister's hand shot out from beneath the light coverlet and grabbed her arm.

"Your daddy's lonely," Sister said in a low voice.

"Ma'am?"

"Your daddy's lonely since your mama got drowned in the Perdido."

"Yes, ma'am..." agreed Lilah tentatively, also in a low voice.

"That was two years ago, wasn't it? Two years ago last May."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm surprised he's not married yet."

"Married? Who would Daddy get married to?" asked Lilah in all surprise.

Sister looked closely at Lilah, and then looked significantly at the door.

Lilah followed that gaze uncomprehendingly.

"Who?' she asked again.

Sister nodded, but wouldn't speak.

"You mean Daddy might marry *Miriam?"*

"Who else?"

"Daddy's not gone marry *Miriam,"* exclaimed Lilah. "Who told you *that?"*

"Nobody told me. Nobody had to tell me. Y'all think just because I'm confined to my bed of pain that I don't know anything, that I don't see anything. Well, I do. Queenie tells me everything I need to hear. I have visitors. I have my own eyes, looking out this window. And I have the leisure to figure things out. I am gone be real surprised if you don't have a new mama before long."

"Sister," said Lilah, "I *cain't* believe it. I'm gone ask Miriam."

"If you do, she'll deny it. She won't give me the satisfaction of saying I was right. But one of these days you're gone walk in from the school, and your Daddy is gone say, 'Lilah, honey, Miriam and I have just run off and gotten ourselves married.' You see if he doesn't."

"I still don't think so."

"Don't you want those earrings?" Sister flicked a bony finger against the bob on Lilah's left ear. Lilah winced.

"Yes, ma'am. Course I do."

"If Miriam becomes your mama, you'll get those when she dies. You'll be an heiress to a fortune in gems."

Lilah looked very doubtful about Sister's predictions. Miriam called out again.

"I got to go," said Lilah, pulling away.

Sister smiled knowingly and let go of Lilah's arm. Lilah ran out of the room. Miriam waited in the hallway and snatched the bobs from Lilah's ears and dropped them into her pocket. "Elinor's gone kill us," she said to Lilah, "so let's get a move on."

. . .

In Perdido's opinion, Billy Bronze had insufficiently mourned the death of his wife. Frances Caskey drowned in the Perdido one stormy night in the spring of 1956. Billy had been away at the time. Desultorily, the Perdido was dragged, above and below the junction, but Frances's body was not recovered. Elinor had told Billy of her daughter Frances's death: "She went out, Billy, the way she always did. But this time she just didn't come back."

Billy said, "It certainly wasn't like Frances to go off and drown herself. I never knew anybody who could swim better than she could. It stormed that night, you said. Maybe she got hit by lightning."

Billy's grief was quiet. He went to work as usual, his routines were unaltered, his appetite was unaffected, he never seemed distracted at odd moments. He slept alone at night now, and that seemed the main difference in his life. Perdido saw this apparent unfeelingness in Billy, and thought ill of him for it. Yet the Caskeys stood up for Billy. With a quiet word or two here and there, Elinor and Queenie reminded the town just how distant Frances had been in the last few years of her life, how she had begun to ignore both husband and daughter, how she had seemed to care for nothing but the river.

Billy, though he may have been alienated from his wife, certainly remained on good terms with the rest of the family. That relationship was unchanged by his wife's death. He remained in the house with his mother- and father-in-law, Elinor and Oscar, and gave no thought to moving anywhere else. When Oscar pointed out that some trouble might arise from the problem of Frances's body never having been found, Billy only asked, "What sort of trouble?"

"Well," said Oscar uncomfortably, "in case you wanted to get married again..."

"Married!" laughed Billy. "Who on earth am I supposed to get married to, Oscar?"

“I don’t know,” said Oscar, “but there might be somebody, someday. I don’t see it, I admit, but it might come about. Someday.”

Billy laughed again. “Elinor wouldn’t let me.” And he shrugged an intelligible shrug, signifying, *and I wouldn’t want her to, either.*

Billy’s relationship with Miriam in these first two years of his widowerhood was the same as it always had been. They were as friendly, as intimate, and as businesslike as ever. It had never occurred to anyone, until it occurred to Sister, that there might be the possibility of a marriage between Billy Bronze and his sister-in-law. Lilah had no strong feelings about what the consequences of such a union might be, but had vague thoughts that they *might* be bad. So she went to her grandmother, and said, “Is Daddy gone marry Miriam? And if he marries her, does that mean I automatically get her jewels when she dies?”

“Where on earth did you get such an idea?” Elinor asked her granddaughter.

“From Sister. Sister says it’s just a matter of time before Daddy and Miriam run off together. Are they gone live over here, or are they gone live next door?”

Elinor said, “I don’t want to hear another word about this. It’s not polite.”

“Not polite?” asked Lilah, bewildered.

“Not polite,” Elinor repeated, and for a time that was an end to the question for Lilah.

But not for Elinor. Elinor went to Oscar, and asked, “Have you heard anything about Billy marrying Miriam?”

Oscar hadn’t heard of it. Neither had Queenie, or Lucille, or Grace, or Zaddie, or Ivey. Elinor called on Sister, and said, “Where did you get such an idea, Sister?”

Sister leaned importantly back on her pillows, and said with an air of mystery, “I know what I know...”

“Oscar,” said Elinor, unsatisfied, “talk to Miriam. You’re the only one in this family she’ll listen to.”

“What difference does it make whether Billy marries Miriam or not?” Oscar asked.

“I’m not sure,” Elinor conceded, “but we ought to see if we can find out one way or the other.”

That evening, then, at the dinner table, while Zaddie was clearing before dessert, Oscar cleared his throat, and said, “Miriam, can I ask you a question without your jumping down my throat?”

“I don’t know,” said Miriam, not one to be trapped as easily as that. “Maybe. Maybe not. What’s the question?”

“Well...” said Oscar hesitantly, “maybe I should ask Billy instead.”

Billy glanced at Oscar, then at Miriam, and said, “Ask me, sure. I won’t get mad.”

“I’ll ask both of you, then,” said Oscar, then hesitated. Zaddie stood in the doorway, stacks of dishes piled high in both hands.

“Get on, Mr. Oscar,” Zaddie said, “’fore I break every one of these plates.”

“We’ve been wondering...”

“Who’s been wondering?” asked Miriam.

“All of us,” blurted Malcolm, and blushed.

“Wondering what?” said Billy.

“Wondering if the two of you were planning on running off and getting married.”

Billy and Miriam looked at each other in amazement.

“Y’all have been sitting around the house thinking about *that?”* said Miriam after a few moments of stunned silence.

“Miriam and me?” croaked Billy.

“Sister said it,” cried Queenie.

“Sister,” said Miriam sharply, “has forgotten that there is another world down at the other end of that hallway.”

“Then you’re not?” asked Lilah.

“Of course not,” said Miriam. “That’s the biggest piece of foolishness I have ever heard. Why on *earth* would I want to marry Billy?”

“Well, you’re together all the time,” said Queenie. “And Billy’s lonely and sad without Frances. You’re always making trips together anyway, so you might as well be married. Billy wouldn’t marry anybody except a Caskey, and you wouldn’t take the trouble to go after some man that was a stranger to you.”

“Those are Sister’s ideas,” said Elinor.

“Well, they are completely wrong,” said Miriam. “I cain’t speak for Billy—”

“Yes, you can,” said Billy quickly.

“—but we have never even thought of getting married, and we’re not about to get married now.”

“I miss Frances,” said Billy, “but I’ve got Lilah here to keep me company. I don’t need another wife. And I wouldn’t *think* of bringing some woman here y’all didn’t know anything about.”

“Wouldn’t have her anyway,” snapped Elinor.

“I know that,” said Billy, “and I’m not about to give y’all up just to have somebody to keep my feet warm at night.”

So yet another of Sister’s analyses was shattered, and the family was relieved. They weren’t even quite sure *why* they were relieved, but they were. Zaddie took the dishes out, brought coffee, more plates, more forks, and then came in with a blackberry pie that was hot out of the oven; there was peach ice cream on the side.

Elinor poured coffee and passed it around. They talked of other things now, but Miriam was still and silent. She turned her cup around and around in its saucer and looked moodily about the room. Finally, when the conversation flagged for a moment, she glanced up and remarked, “Besides, you know, Billy and I *couldn’t* get married.”

“Why not?” said Queenie, whose most fervent purpose in life was to keep conversations going. “Because Frances hasn’t been declared legally dead yet?”

“No,” said Miriam. “Because I’m already engaged.”

Chapter 73

Put It Off

Miriam looked around the table. “Well,” she said after a moment, “isn’t anybody going to bother to ask me who it is? I don’t go off and get married *every* day, you know.”

Everyone at the table was dumbfounded. If it wasn’t Billy, then who on earth was Miriam going to wed?

“Who?” said Queenie at last. “Miriam, we are so happy for you, whoever it is, but...”

“But what?” said Miriam.

“But we had no idea,” said Oscar.

Miriam shrugged. “Neither did I. I just decided. This minute. Y’all want me to get married so bad, guess I’ll have to get married.”

“Have you told the man?” asked Elinor.

“Not yet,” said Miriam. “Maybe I ought to do that right now.” She looked directly across the table at Malcolm, who had been silent and wide-eyed through all this, and said, “Malcolm, I accept your proposal.” Then she turned her gaze first to Queenie on one side of Malcolm, and then to Elinor at the head of the table. “Which one of y’all wants to arrange the wedding?”

Queenie grabbed her son’s arm beneath the tablecloth. “Malcolm!” she hissed. “What in the world do you mean by asking Miriam to marry you?”

“He is marrying me for my money, Queenie,” said Miriam, unperturbed. “And because I tell him what to do. And ’cause he loves me, I guess. Malcolm needs somebody to keep him in line, and you’re not always gone be around. You’re an old woman, Queenie.”

“I know that,” returned Queenie. “But why are you accepting?”

“Because I probably *should* get married,” said Miriam. “And because Malcolm is right here asking, and because y’all know that I am not about to put up with somebody who’s gone cause me *one ounce* of trouble. And Malcolm,” Miriam went on, eyeing her new fiancé across the table, “you are gone continue to do just what I tell you to, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Malcolm with a somewhat overenthusiastic grin. “Mama, you are pinching me!”

Queenie let go of her son’s arm.

“Queenie and I will take care of the wedding together,” Elinor announced gravely. “Miriam, I think you’ve made a wise choice. We don’t need any outsiders in this family.” As she said this, she placed her hand gently over Billy Bronze’s at her side, as if to reassure him that she did not think of *him* in that light.

Lilah, who sat next to her father on the other side, looked up at him and whispered, “Daddy, are you disappointed?” She didn’t mean for anyone else at the table to hear her question, but they all did.

Billy laughed and put his arm around Lilah. “Lord, no!” he exclaimed. “I’ve got Miriam on my back enough as it is! You think I want to *live* with her? Malcolm, you’re going to have a rough row to hoe!”

Malcolm only grinned. “I’m gone be forty next month. Miriam’s gone be thirty-seven in the spring. ’Bout time we settled down.”

“Almost too late to have children,” sighed Queenie. “I was hoping for another little grandchild. But, Miriam, if you got started quick—”

“Queenie, you shut up about children,” said Miriam. “I see one of those things in my house, I’m gone be using its head for a pincushion. Malcolm, don’t you let Queenie put any ideas in your head about giving her grandchildren, because nobody is going to force *me* into a maternity wardrobe.”

“Malcolm,” asked Oscar, “where do you and Miriam intend on living?”

“Oscar, don’t start asking me questions about all this. I just now found out about it myself. You want information, you ask Miriam. Miriam,” he said diffidently, “you thought about where you want us to live?”

“I don’t know,” said Miriam. “Sister doesn’t have a very high opinion of you, and I don’t know how she’d take you moving in over there. And your mama wouldn’t particularly care to have *me* underfoot.” Here Queenie began a protest, but Miriam cut her off. “Don’t bother to say anything sweet, Queenie, ’cause nobody at this table would believe it.”

“I wasn’t gone ask you to come live with me, Miriam. I was just gone ask you if you had spoken to Sister about any of this?”

“I have not,” said Miriam. She pushed back her chair. “So I guess I better do that right now. Tell Zaddie to keep some coffee warm. I don’t know how soon I’ll be back.”

. . .

Sister didn't like it one little bit. Miriam sat in a straight-backed chair by the door and fiddled with the dial on the radio, though she didn't turn on the set. Sister railed.

"I thought you were gone marry Billy!" cried Sister. "Billy's a man! Malcolm Strickland is no good, and has been no good since the day Queenie Strickland set foot in Perdido. I first saw Malcolm at Genevieve's funeral, and I said to Mama, 'Mama, that child is gone come to no good.' It was James and Dollie Faye Crawford kept that boy out of prison. It was you and Billy got him out from behind the counter of a barbecue joint in Mississippi. It has taken all the Caskeys together to keep that boy out of trouble for the past ten years."

"Malcolm's not a boy anymore, Sister. Malcolm's gone be forty years old next month."

"And what does he have to show for it?"

"He doesn't need anything to show for it. We're all rich, and perfectly capable of taking care of him. He's a lot of help around here, you know. He does lots of things that need doing. He keeps the roof in repair. He goes out and buys light bulbs. Why, he was in here last week, killing a bat that came down your chimney. You were glad enough to see him then."

"Oh, he's fine when it comes to killing bats," said Sister sarcastically. "But I don't know that that's much of a recommendation when it comes to marriage."

"I've met plenty of men who weren't even *that* much use," Miriam said. "At any rate, it doesn't really matter to me what you've got to say about it, Sister, 'cause I've made up my mind to marry Malcolm. And that's what I'm gone do."

"When did he ask you?" said Sister after a moment. Curiosity had got the upper hand over displeasure.

"Last week. Last month. Last year. Malcolm's been asking me to marry him for ten years. Malcolm brings me my mail in the morning, and says, 'Good morning, Miriam. Will you marry me?'"

"Then why did you all of a sudden say yes?"

"Because I looked at my birth certificate the other day and I saw how old I was and I thought, *It's about time, Miriam.* And one day, I walked in here, and I saw how old you were, Sister."

"How old I am!"

Miriam nodded. “And I thought, *Someday Sister’s gone die, and then I’m gone be left all alone.”*

This casual observation about her mortality shocked Sister into a horrified silence. When she finally spoke her voice was weak and she was not at all to the point. “Miriam, will you *please* keep your hands off that radio. You are driving me crazy.”

Miriam dropped her hand from the dial and then continued, glancing out the window as she spoke. “I’ve never lived by myself. I got to thinking what it would be like to be in this house all by myself. And I don’t think I’d like it. I’d probably go crazy. And I’m much too busy to waste my time going crazy.”

“So why didn’t you just wait till I was dead before you got married?” said Sister. “Then you wouldn’t have to deal with Malcolm until you had gotten me out of the way.”

Miriam laughed. “Oh, Sister, you don’t bother me anymore. And neither does Malcolm.”

“I don’t think I want Malcolm Strickland in this house,” said Sister. “His tread is too heavy.”

“Then we’ll move in next door with Queenie and leave you here alone.”

“No!” shouted Sister, suddenly panicked. “Miriam, why don’t you put off the marriage for a little while?”

“Till you’re dead?”

“No,” answered Sister, calming a bit, “just till I’m used to the idea. Just for a little while, Miriam. I’m confined to this bed. It’s so hard for me to change. I cain’t even *think* of you getting married. You’re still my little girl.”

Miriam turned from the window and smiled.

“What are you laughing about?” demanded Sister.

“At you. You’re trying to get me to put off my wedding, just like Grandmama tried to get you to put off your wedding to Early.”

“Mama was right! See what a mess I made of it? If I had listened to Mama, I’d be a happy woman today! So you ought to listen to me, and put this wedding off. Just for a while. Just till you’ve thought about it some more.”

“No,” said Miriam easily, walking toward the door. “I’ve made up my mind, and that is that.”

. . .

And that *was* that. The ability the Caskeys had to astonish Perdido seemed inexhaustible. The announcement of the engagement of Malcolm Strickland and Miriam Caskey was a source of vast wonder in the town. Previously there had been two local theories when it came to the question of Miriam's marriage. Half the town thought she would marry Billy Bronze, and the other half was certain she would never marry at all. That she would marry Malcolm Strickland was a possibility that had occurred to no one. The only satisfactory explanation Perdido could come up with was that Malcolm had raped Miriam, and that she was pregnant.

Miriam wasn't a woman for long engagements. She announced that the wedding would take place two days after Christmas, a date she chose for the practical reason that her calendar was clear for the holiday and the few days on either side of it. "I have no intention," Miriam told her mother, "of calling up people in Houston and New York to rearrange my appointments just because I'm getting married."

That gave Elinor and Queenie just two months to make all the arrangements, but they went at it with a will. The wedding itself—like all the Caskey ceremonies—was to be a small and private affair, held at ten in the morning in the living room at Elinor's. The reception, however, was a different matter. It was Queenie's idea, originally, that for a change they should throw a proper party—"With everybody in Perdido and beyond invited," as she put it. Queenie had really never expected Miriam to go along with this idea for a minute; she had been certain that Miriam would want everything as brief and casual as possible. But Miriam surprised her future mother-in-law. "Good idea. Invite everybody," she said. And everyone *was* invited. More than five hundred invitations to the reception went out. Miriam was a businesswoman, and as such she was well known all over southern Alabama, the Florida panhandle, and much farther afield. She recognized that she had a position to maintain, and that position dictated that her wedding be in keeping with her stature. The bridegroom, it was true, was not all that he might have been, but all Miriam's business associates had seen Malcolm in tow at one time or another. Most, if the truth be told, conjectured that Miriam kept him around for more reasons than the fact that he knew how to change a light bulb.

Oscar was away much of the time between the announcement of Miriam's engagement and the wedding itself. Elinor saw to that; she wanted

him out of the way so that she could do what needed to be done. She suggested that he see what the golf courses were like in Kentucky, and Luvadia allowed her son Sammy to accompany Mr. Oscar as his caddy. Oscar's eyes were poor, and he needed someone who was familiar and patient with his infirmity. For those two months, Oscar and Sammy—who was only fourteen, and illegally out of school for this time—drove around Georgia and South Carolina, and Oscar played at country clubs and public links all over both states. Oscar put up in motels and hotels, sneaking Sammy to his room at night, the boy sleeping on the floor, rolled in blankets. Oscar called Perdido every day and asked Elinor if things had quieted down enough for him to come home. Her invariable reply was, "Stay away as long as you can, darling. You'll just be trampled underfoot down here."

Miriam wouldn't help with anything, but insisted on maintaining her schedule at the mill. She and Malcolm and Billy made two trips to Houston, and one to Atlanta in those short eight weeks. Her wedding dress was fitted in her office while she was recording letters into a Dictaphone.

Malcolm was helplessly happy. He could scarcely believe his good fortune. He worried a bit about whether or not he would make a good husband, but then reflected that this was none of his concern, really. Miriam would make of him what she wanted. With this bolstering reasoning, he gave himself up completely to his contentment. His relationship with Miriam was unchanged, with a single exception: when he and Miriam and Billy traveled together, it was now Malcolm and Miriam who put up in the double room and Billy who took the single. Before, Billy had usually shared the room with Miriam. Queenie had once asked Miriam why she didn't let Malcolm and Billy share the double on these trips, and take the single herself. That surely had a better *appearance.* Queenie had received an unexpected reply: "Queenie, the truth is that I'm afraid to sleep alone. And I'm old enough and rich enough to do what I want."

Malcolm, now that he shared a room with Miriam, made no attempt to sleep in her bed. He would be guided by her in *that* business as well.

Queenie remained bewildered by all these new circumstances. But she stayed busy—there was so little time, and *so* much to be done—and gave herself little time for reflection. Nevertheless, when she sat still for a few moments, she could scarcely credit her son's engagement. He wasn't marrying Miriam for her money, of that Queenie was certain. Queenie

herself was rich now, and she had assured Malcolm that her will provided amply for him. She could not bring herself to believe, however, that Malcolm really loved his bride-to-be. Yet perhaps he did, and perhaps she even loved him. Queenie would sigh. All this was beyond her, and it was much easier to worry about getting the napkins printed in time.

. . .

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Lucille and Grace hosted a shower for Miriam, and every woman of any social standing in Perdido was pleased to attend. Lucille and Grace had always been reclusive outside the family, and many in Perdido had never visited Gavin Pond Farm before. The place was changed out of all recognition from what it once had been. The little farm house that pregnant Lucille had entered with such misgiving fourteen years before had been spruced up and added onto in so many different directions that it looked like a different place altogether. A blacktop lane led to it from the main road, there was a huge brick patio and a large swimming pool. Two acres of woods had been cleared for a camellia garden, and Lucille was busily establishing some of the rarest species known. An enormous herd of cows grazed in the pecan orchard, and the place boasted three cars, two trucks, two tractors, and five different boats. At night, the sky south of Gavin Pond Farm was orange with the light of the burn-off flares of the oil wells in the swamp.

Grace was forty-six, thinner than any Caskey had ever been—gaunt, actually. She was burned by the sun, and made happy by Lucille. Lucille was thirty-eight, fatter than Queenie, and made happy by Grace. Lucille's boy, Tommy Lee Burgess, was now fourteen. Shy, good-natured, and bumbling, he was an odd member of the family; not paid much attention to when he was about, and altogether forgotten when he was not. Tommy Lee loved to fish, hunt, drive cars, and be by himself. Grace once asked him if he maybe wanted to be sent to military school, where he'd be around some men for a change, but Tommy Lee shook his head in horror, and said he didn't want to go anywhere or do anything else than what he was doing.

Grace and Lucille had built Luvadia the biggest kitchen anybody in those parts had ever seen, and Zaddie and Melva came out to help with the food for the shower. The ladies of Perdido showed up half an hour early in hopes that they would be shown around the place. Lucille was proud of her house, and happy to comply. The ladies were impressed, and playfully chastised Grace and Lucille for keeping this wonderful place such a secret.

In the midst of the festivities Grace said to Miriam, “This place started out a secret, what with Lucille coming out here when she was pregnant. And then when we found oil, we wanted to keep *that* secret for a while. So Lucille and I just got in the habit of living here all by ourselves, and never having anybody but family. Maybe we ought to start entertaining a little more.”

“Wouldn’t catch me doing for this pack,” said Miriam in a low voice, gazing around at the crowd of women bent over the food on the dining room table.

The charade played out by Miriam when she sat down and opened her gifts far outdid any of the performances the ladies put on during a real game of charades later. Miriam looked with excitement on a new adding machine, but she didn’t see much good in pink underwear and fuzzy bathroom slippers. She was, however, as gracious as she was capable of being, and afterward even Elinor went so far as to say, “You could have made things very unpleasant, but you didn’t.”

“There was no point,” said Miriam. “They were being nice to me.”

“Sometimes,” said Elinor, “I think you may be growing up.”

“The question is,” sighed Miriam, “how the hell am I gone get rid of all that damned *junk?”*

. . .

Sister could not be reconciled to the wedding. She would have nothing to do with it, and she wouldn’t hear it spoken of in her presence. She refused even to admit aloud that Miriam was marrying Malcolm. Queenie had been forced to desert her in this busy time, so the whole thing rankled even more. Ivey sat with Sister every day, in the straight chair beside the radio, but Ivey wasn’t one for gossip, and Sister was bored and restless and stared out the window through binoculars at Elinor’s house. But she never saw more than Zaddie or Elinor occasionally passing a window.

Ivey wouldn’t relay any news from next door, for her feud with Zaddie had kept up, and they were not speaking. No one had ever discovered the reason for this coolness between the aging black sisters, for it was a private affair, and neither Zaddie nor Ivey ever said anything about it directly.

In the drawer of her bedside table, Sister kept a calendar on which she marked off the days until Christmas, and every day she would count up those remaining. The ever-decreasing figure preyed on her mind to an extent that Ivey found alarming. Ivey began to ply Sister with sweet liquids

poured out of unmarked blue bottles, but these nostrums did not appear to help. Sister grew weaker—but crosser—and every morning she seemed to have sunk down deeper into her bulwark of goose-down pillows.

About ten days before the wedding, Miriam went to New Orleans on an unexpected and unavoidable trip. When she returned at suppertime two days later, Ivey was waiting for her behind the screen door. "Miz Caskey sick," she said simply. "She want to talk to you."

Upstairs, Miriam was shocked by Sister's appearance. "You *are* sick," she said bluntly. "I don't think I've ever seen anybody look worse."

Sister seemed scarcely able to open her eyes. Her head lolled forward on her neck; her hands lay curled and helpless atop the neatly folded coverlet. She looked as if she had not moved for days, a frail puppet whose strings had all been cut.

"Put it off," she whispered. Her lips scarcely moved. Miriam moved closer to the bed.

"Put it off," Sister repeated, no more loudly than before.

"No," said Miriam, finally comprehending the cryptic command. "For one thing, Elinor and Queenie have gone to a great deal of trouble. For another thing, it's too late. And last of all, I want to go through with it."

Sister's head lolled to one side. "It'll kill me," she whispered. Her head lolled to the other side, and her eyes shut with the motion.

Miriam sat on the edge of the bed. It was dark outside, and a single low lamp burned on the bedside table. Miriam took Sister's hand. "Sister," she said firmly, "even if I believed that, I'd go through with it."

Sister opened her eyes slowly, and peered up at Miriam through tears. "You'd kill me, wouldn't you?"

"Sister," said Miriam, now taking the other hand, and pressing them lightly against Sister's breast, "you are turning into Grandmama."

"Noooo..." Sister's protest was no more than a slow exhalation of breath.

"You are. You want to trick me into putting this wedding off. Just the way Grandmama would have done. But you're not Grandmama, you're Sister. And I'm not you, I'm not Oscar. I'm not even me when I was younger. Nobody's going to run roughshod over me—not about this, and not about anything else. You think you can get me to put off this wedding by pulling this business—"

"Not business..."

“Whether it is or it isn’t is of no concern to me,” Miriam went on. “If you’re really sick, then I’m sorry, but it makes no difference. I won’t let it. So you might as well get better, Sister, because next Saturday night there are going to be four hundred and thirty-seven people tromping through this house giving me their congratulations, and I wouldn’t want the noise to disturb you.”

Miriam released Sister’s hands, then rose and walked out the door and down the hall to her own room to unpack.

“Put it off,” whispered Sister Haskew a few moments later, not realizing that Miriam was no longer in the room.

Chapter 74

The Wedding Party

Sister's condition remained the same in the week before the wedding. Oscar, on his return, was shocked to find her so deplorably weak and wandering. Christmas came and after presents had been opened at Elinor's in the morning, everyone went over to give Sister her gifts, congregating in the hallway outside her room, but entering only one at a time. Sister smiled wanly, but she wasn't always able to open her eyes. Lilah sat on the edge of the bed and placed a wrapped box on Sister's upturned hand. One finger clawed briefly at the ribbon, but then Lilah had to open it herself. It was a box of Sister's favorite powder, that smelled of dead roses. "Thank you, child," Sister whispered, and her eyes, wet with tears, flickered open briefly.

No one, not even Elinor, dared suggest that the wedding be postponed on account of Sister's illness. Miriam had been preternaturally good about all the wedding arrangements, acquiescing to each and every suggestion put forth by Elinor or Queenie, but who knew what might happen if Miriam were asked to put off the date of her marriage to Malcolm Strickland? She might not go through with it at all. She might cart Malcolm off to a justice of the peace, and never come home afterward. She would certainly never set foot in Sister's room again. "And I'm not sure Miriam's not right," sighed Oscar, who was much affected by his sister's increased infirmity. "I remember how I put off and put off to please Mama, and it got us into nothing but trouble."

Elinor did not contradict him, and the wedding remained scheduled for Saturday.

The day after Christmas, workers from the mill came and erected open-sided tents in the yards behind all three of the Caskey houses, using the tall, narrow trunks of the water oaks as poles. The striped canvas tents stretched from the back porches of the houses all the way to the levee. A stage was erected on the edge of the forest, and here the small orchestra from Mobile would play. Malcolm was in charge of chairs and tables, and he had gathered them from churches, armories, and VFW halls all over the county. These preparations were of great interest to Perdido, and cars drove

slowly up and down the road in front of the houses all day long. Children sat perched on the fence around the orchard across the way, wearing their new Christmas clothes and showing off to one another their new toys as they watched the proceedings.

During all of this, Oscar felt only that he was in the way—in his own home—and the only place he might be *out* of the way was with Sister. So he made his way over to her house and sat at her side, talking of old times. Only occasionally would Sister respond to her brother's long stories and reminiscences, and rarely in a voice loud enough for him to make out the words. And when he did understand her, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, for it appeared to him that Sister hadn't comprehended a word he had said to her. Yet there he continued to sit. He held Sister's hand, and he talked about the years in which he and Sister had grown up in this house with their mother Mary-Love. "And, Sister, you know what?" he said. "You're getting to look more and more like her every day."

All the Caskey cooks working for weeks together wouldn't have been able to prepare food for the crowd of people that was anticipated, and the caterers began arriving soon after dawn on Saturday morning.

The day was overcast and dim, though warm. The caterers worried about rain, but the Caskeys had no fear. Elinor had declared, succinctly but with absolute authority, "No rain today."

At nine o'clock, Elinor and Queenie, already in their finery, converged on Miriam's house and went upstairs to help Miriam into her dress. They found her struggling into it without ceremony or sentiment. "Damn! Damn! Damn!" she cried. "Don't people know enough to take the damned pins out?"

She was ready in another quarter-hour, and there was nothing to do but sit and wait until ten o'clock. Miriam sat impatiently by the window, beating her bouquet in the palm of her hand and occasionally calling out greetings to one of the workmen passing by below. Queenie went home to make certain that Malcolm got his tie on straight. Lucille and Grace came by, kissed Miriam, and said, "You are making a great mistake getting married to a man. We hope you're gone be the happiest woman in the world."

A few minutes before it was time to go next door, Elinor got up and shut the door, then strode back across the room and stood before her daughter. She and Miriam were alone.

“Well?” said Miriam impatiently. “Am I unzipped?”

“You look beautiful,” said Elinor quietly. “I just wanted to ask you what you and Malcolm are doing about a ring?”

Miriam laughed, and pointed at the dresser in the corner of the room. “Go ask Lilah if I don’t have a whole damned case full of rings in the bottom drawer over there—and that’s not to mention my safety-deposit boxes. I reached in there and pulled one out and gave it to Malcolm. No reason in putting out good money when I’ve got so many already.”

“Miriam,” said Elinor, “you know I haven’t given you anything yet.”

“Well, you’ve arranged all this,” said Miriam, waving her hand inclusively toward the window. Below were the striped tents, a dozen servants and hired men; the sound of rattling bottles and a murmur of directives floated up. “I couldn’t have done all that.”

“I have something else for you though.”

“What?” asked Miriam suspiciously.

“This,” said Elinor, reaching into her purse and drawing out a simple diamond ring. The solitaire was cloudy but large, nearly three karats; the setting a four-pronged gold band. Miriam took it from her mother slowly, fingered the facets of the jewel, and then glanced back up at Elinor.

“This was Grandmama’s,” said Miriam slowly. “You took it off her when she was lying in the coffin. Before I got there.”

“That’s right,” said Elinor.

“I have never forgiven you for that.”

“I know,” said Elinor.

“It didn’t matter that you were the one who told me where the oil was down below Gavin Pond Farm, it didn’t matter that you never tried to interfere with me in the running of the mill, it didn’t matter that you kept this family together and made everybody pretty much happy—I have never forgiven you for taking this ring.”

Elinor said nothing.

“I suppose,” said Miriam, “that you want me to forgive you now.”

“I don’t expect that,” said Elinor. “But it was right that you should have the ring, now that you’re getting married.”

Miriam glanced out of the window. “It’s getting time,” she said. “I’m going to have to go speak to Sister.” She slipped the ring on her finger, rose and went out of the room, leaving her mother alone.

. . .

Miriam stood at the side of Sister's bed, holding her bouquet in her hands before her. It was the fragrance of those fresh flowers, so pervasive in the room that for so many years had smelled of only dead blossoms, that caused Sister's eyes to open.

"Sister," said Miriam, "I'm going over to Elinor's now, and Malcolm and I are gone get married."

Sister tried to turn away her head, but hadn't the strength. Her eyes fell shut again.

"We'll spend the afternoon getting ready for the reception this evening, and then after that Malcolm and I are taking off for New Orleans for our honeymoon. We were gone go to New York, but there's some business I need to get done in New Orleans, so we changed our plans. Malcolm says we'll go anywhere I want to go, and if I don't want to go anywhere we can stay right here. Queenie's gone stay with you while I'm gone, the way she always does. And when we get back, I'm moving Malcolm in over here. I haven't decided yet whether he's gone stay in my room, or whether I'm gone put him across the hall. But that doesn't matter to you, I guess, since you never get out of this room anyway. You don't have to worry about Malcolm, because I've already told him to leave you alone, and not come near you unless you call him. And he's already bought three new pairs of shoes with soft soles, so he won't be stomping through the house the way he usually does."

By no movement or other sign did Sister indicate she had heard a thing Miriam had said to her.

"Elinor just gave me Mama's ring, Sister. I thought that ring was gone forever. It's bigger than I remembered it, but the stone is flawed."

Sister still did not move. Her hands lay lifeless atop the coverlet.

Miriam suddenly turned and dragged a chair up to the bed. She tossed her bouquet aside. She sat in the chair, reached forward, and grasped both Sister's hands and squeezed them.

"Your blessing!" she hissed. "Give me your blessing, Sister!"

Sister slowly opened her eyes, and even more slowly, she shook her head no.

. . .

The wedding ceremony was quiet and hurried. Ruthie Driver officiated. Ruthie, as everyone had predicted, had grown up to be just like her mother, Annie Bell. When Annie Bell Driver died, Ruthie took over the pastorship

for the Zion Grace Baptist Church. Now she was married herself, but most people were hard put to remember her husband's name. Neither Miriam nor Malcolm attended Ruthie's church, but Miriam said she felt more comfortable being married by a woman. Billy Bronze was Malcolm's best man, and Lilah was the single bridesmaid. Oscar and Elinor held hands, as did Grace and Lucille. Tommy Lee put his arm around Queenie's heaving shoulders. The only music was that of a carpenter's last-minute hammering outside.

"All right," said Miriam, as soon as Ruthie had cried *Amen* to her prayer, "let's get this show on the road."

Everyone ran home and changed out of their stiff clothes, and reappeared a few minutes later, ready to help with the final preparations for the reception that evening. Oscar took himself up to Sister's room, and listened to a football game on the radio. Elinor and Queenie seemed to be everywhere at once, and there was so much to do and see to, that for the first time in more than ten years Ivey and Zaddie found themselves speaking to each other. Grace and Lucille systematically set tasks for themselves, and calmly carried them out one by one; they set up the punch tables, found the right tablecloths, unwrapped and washed all of James's hundreds and hundreds of cut-glass punch cups. Even Lilah was busy, ordering about men who were three times her age, and feeling very important about it all. Miriam roamed about with Malcolm more or less in tow, saying a word here and there to the caterers, the servants, and the mill workers, not bothering to help with anything herself, but evidently enjoying herself greatly. "It just feels so good to be out of that damned dress," she said several times. She wore Mary-Love's diamond ring on her finger, but she avoided speaking to her mother.

By four o'clock, everything was ready. Lilah ran upstairs at Sister's and said to Oscar, "Granddaddy, Grandmama says it's time to go home and get dressed. People are gone be coming up any time now."

Oscar rose, went to Sister's side, and said, "Sister, is all this gone bother you? Are you gone be disturbed having so many people about?"

Sister didn't respond, but Oscar felt the slightest pressure of her fingers against the palm of his hand. He hadn't any idea how to interpret that.

The first guests arrived half an hour early, which was only to be expected. It was impossible for those coming from long distances to time arrivals exactly. Queenie's entire house had been set up as a kind of retiring

room for gentlemen, while Miriam's was given over to the ladies. Elinor and Oscar and Queenie, as parents of the wedded couple, received in the formal rooms of Elinor's house. Miriam was dressed in green silk, and wore no other jewelry than Mary-Love's solitaire, her simple wedding-band, and a single bracelet of emeralds. Malcolm, who had grown accustomed to wearing a suit, appeared serene in his new character as husband of the heiress. The guests agreed that Malcolm wasn't the brightest man in the world, that he wasn't the husband for *every* woman, and that he doubtless would be led a merry dance by his wife, but they also agreed that, on the whole, he was exactly suited to the position to which Miriam had raised him. No one was surprised when she sent him off to refill her punch cup, to get her three petit fours of the type she liked best, to ask Elinor if the man from Texas National Oil had arrived yet. This was exactly her treatment of him before their marriage, and everyone had assumed that this was the way things would continue.

Dinner was served outside. The striped canvas tents billowed and peaked in the breeze and underneath, the trunks of the water oaks were like slim, grotesquely curved columns. Sand got into everyone's shoes, but the hundreds of yellow lights provided warm, flattering illumination, and for once the smell of the Perdido, flowing closely at hand behind the levee, was sweet, as if specially perfumed for the occasion.

Perdido was beside itself with pleasure at this grand party. Miriam had not made many demands concerning the preparations, but she had decreed that every mill worker receive an invitation. And so every mill worker—and every mill worker's wife—was there; most had bought new clothes for the occasion. There wasn't a one of them that Miriam didn't know by name. Oscar, in the receiving line, was shocked by the number he either had forgotten or had never known at all. Guests came from all over south Alabama and western Florida, arriving in caravans of cars from Mobile, Montgomery, and Pensacola. Oil and lumber men flew in from New York, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Houston. There was even an auxiliary tent set up behind Queenie's house for the black population of Perdido.

After the dinner was served, the mill workers took off their jackets, and quickly cleared away all the tables and chairs. The orchestra meanwhile tuned its instruments and began to play. Sammy Sapp and an army of black girls and boys raked the sand once again in preparation for the dancing.

That was at nine o'clock, and Miriam declared that the music would play until the last couple dropped on their feet.

Miriam and Malcolm had the first dance, and were applauded and cheered for their expertise. Elinor and Queenie exchanged proud but slightly puzzled glances—neither of them had imagined that *those* two would have performed so creditably.

Oscar cut in, and danced off with Miriam. Malcolm bowed to Elinor, and brought her out onto the sand. Shortly thereafter, the dancing was general, and more than a thousand people waltzed in the sand among the water oaks.

Those who had lived in Perdido a long time marveled not at the splendor of the proceedings, for the Caskeys were very rich indeed, and could well afford this and much more besides, but rather that there was any party at all. No one could remember when any Caskey had been married off with any celebration whatsoever. Caskey weddings had always been simple if somewhat hugger-mugger affairs, and that Miriam of all people should have wanted—or even allowed—such an outlay as this was as astonishing a thing as Perdido was likely to see in a long while.

. . .

Because Miriam's house had been set aside for the ladies, there was throughout the evening a constant traipsing in and out the front door, in and out the back door, up and down the stairs, into and out of Miriam's room, the two guest rooms, and the two bathrooms. Before the party really got under way, Queenie had gone up and sat with Sister for a few minutes, thinking that she was paler and less responsive than ever. Queenie had also installed Luvadia's ten-year-old daughter, Versie, as a sort of guard for Sister, giving the child strict instructions to keep the door closed against all visitors. But Versie was a little country colored girl and no match for the ladies of Perdido, who knew Sister's room to be at the end of the hall. The ladies of Perdido were not slow in taking advantage of this unprecedented opportunity of peeking in and speaking to Sister Haskew, who hadn't been seen on the streets of Perdido in over ten years. They came singly at first, brushing aside Versie and sitting at the side of the bed for a few moments, speaking volubly to Sister, lamenting her ill health, and finally growing constrained when it became apparent that Sister was not going to respond in any way. Soon it seemed impossible to shut the door, and the ladies of Perdido swarmed into the room and surrounded Sister's bed. That room,

visited so rarely in the past decade, became a welter of silks and wools, powders, and perfumes, gabble and laughter. Sister lay immobile, propped up against her wall of goose-down pillows, her hands upturned and curled on the neatly turned coverlet.

Versie grew so demoralized by her inability to keep out these women that at last she gave up the fight altogether, and sneaked away, down the stairs, out the back door, and into the tent reserved for the colored people. She hid in a shadowed corner, drank punch, and ate chicken until she couldn't eat or drink any more. She wasn't discovered until an hour later, by Oscar, whose dimming eyesight caused him to trip over her on his way to the bathroom in Queenie's house.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"It's Versie, Mr. Oscar," the child replied, frightened.

"Is that Luvadia's Versie?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you doing here? Queenie told me she had put you upstairs with Sister."

"She did, Mr. Oscar," Versie replied, terrified at being discovered in the neglect of her duty, "but they was so many ladies in there, they 'bout drove me out!"

"What!" exclaimed Oscar. "You mean to say you let people get into that room?"

"I couldn't keep 'em out!"

"Versie, you go find Queenie and you get her up there and you get those women out of there, you hear me? *Right now!"*

Oscar went on to the bathroom, but when he was finished he went next door to Miriam's and went inside. The ladies screamed and laughed at a man in their midst, but Oscar paid no attention to them. He marched up the stairs and down the hall to Sister's room. Versie evidently hadn't found Queenie yet—or perhaps Versie was so afraid of Queenie's finding out what she had done that she had not sought her at all—for the room was still crowded with women. They sat in the chairs, they leaned against the furniture, they perched on the windowsill and the edge of the bed. There in their midst lay Sister, silent and unmoving.

"Out!" cried Oscar loudly. "Everybody out!"

There was an excited protest, for Oscar's tone was rude and peremptory. Yet Oscar said nothing else. He simply took hold of the arm of

the woman nearest him—the wife of one of the new doctors in town—and shoved her none too gently out the door.

"Well!" she cried, and turned around to object, but by then Oscar had grabbed a second woman, the mill accountant's wife, and shoved both women out into the hallway.

Now Oscar had his hands on a third; he kept repeating over and over again, "Out! Out! All of you out!" Seeing that he meant business, there was a general retreat to the door, and in only a few seconds more, the room was cleared. Oscar slammed the door shut, whipped the curtains closed, and he and his sister were alone. Oscar pulled a chair up close to the bed.

"Sister," he said in a low voice, "have you got your eyes open? It's so dark in here, I cain't hardly see."

Sister didn't move that Oscar could tell.

"I got 'em all out. Queenie had no business leaving Luvadia's Versie up here. That child is too small to bar a door. But don't you worry, 'cause I'm gone sit up here with you. And there's not one of them that's gone get past that door, not while I'm in here."

So, waiting for Queenie, Oscar sat back in the chair, and told Sister about the reception—how many people were there, and who had said what, and how pretty Miriam was, and how handsome Malcolm looked. He could hear the orchestra playing from its stage at the edge of the woods, and when he knew the words of the songs, he'd sing along for a while and smile at Sister and straighten her covers. After a while, though, he grew serious, and said, "I'm gone say something you don't want to hear, Sister, but it's got to be said. And that's that you have treated Miriam badly about this whole business. Miriam didn't deserve to be treated badly, she has always been good to you. Miriam is sharp, but I don't believe that there was ever a human being on the face of this earth more faithful than Miriam. She would do anything for you, and you have treated her badly. You have been acting the way Mama would have acted. There's no other way to put it. You are getting to be just like Mama, and it has just about killed me to watch it happen. But here you are, and it's not too late to change, 'cause when Miriam and Malcolm come back from New Orleans, they're gonna be right down there at the other end of the hall, and you're gone have twenty opportunities a day to be nice to them. And you could do it, if you put your mind to it. I cain't speak for Miriam, whether she really loves Malcolm or not, and I cain't speak for Malcolm, whether he loves Miriam or not. But it

looks that way, despite what any of us ever thought about either of them. And they deserve every chance in the world of being happy. I have never said this, Sister, I have never even said this to Elinor, but it hurt me, and it hurt me bad, when you and Mama took Miriam away from Elinor and me. I watched her grow up over here knowing that she was mine, knowing that she had been taken away from me and that she would never ever belong to me again. That hurt me bad, and even Frances couldn't make up for it. Billy doesn't make up for it, Lilah doesn't make up for it. When you took Miriam away from me, that was a loss that I have never gotten over, not to this very day, Sister. So you have an obligation—an obligation to *me*—to see to it that my little girl, my little girl who was taken away from me so many, many years ago, is happy. Sister," he said softly, "Sister, are you gone do it?"

He reached forward and grasped Sister's hands atop the coverlet, but they were already cold and stiff.

Chapter 75

Queenie Alone

Versie at last found Queenie in the crush of the reception and told her that Mr. Oscar wanted her upstairs in Sister's room. Queenie didn't pause even to try to figure out why the black girl was trembling so, but hurried into Miriam's house and up the stairs, past women who complained to her of Oscar's rudeness to them. Queenie tried the door of the room but discovered it locked. She pounded on the door.

"Oscar!" she called. "Is that you in there with Sister?"

In a moment, she heard Oscar's low voice on the other side. "Go away, Queenie," he said. "Sister and I are talking."

"Are you all right?"

"We're fine," returned Oscar. He unlocked the door, and opened it a crack. Queenie thrust her head inside and peered beyond Oscar to the bed. There lay Sister, still and silent.

"Well," whispered Queenie, "I am glad you are up here to keep her company. I know all this noise must be driving her right out of her head."

"Queenie, listen to me. I'm gone stay up here and talk to Sister, but you got to do a couple of things for me." There was an urgent tone in Oscar's voice that puzzled Queenie, but she only nodded acquiescence and asked no questions. "See if you can get hold of Ivey or Zaddie or Luvadia and get one of them up here. Then tell Elinor to come up. But most important, tell Malcolm that he and Miriam are *not* to take off for New Orleans till they've seen me. And they are not to go till the last damn guest has gone home."

Oscar started to shut the door, but Queenie jammed her foot into the crack and pushed the door back a bit. She peered around the door again at Sister on the bed, shifted her gaze back at Oscar, and then said, "All right, Oscar."

. . .

Zaddie and Ivey arrived at Sister's room and were ensconced on chairs on either side of Sister's door for the rest of that evening; none of the ladies of Perdido got near enough even to knock. Elinor arrived, went into the room, and came out again a few minutes later. After that, Grace and Lucille did

the same. Billy Bronze entered the room and remained with Oscar. A rumor began circulating around the party that Sister Haskew was fuming and uncontrollable, and that the Caskeys were desperately attempting to dissuade her from calling in a lawyer and disinheriting Miriam. People glanced sidewise at Miriam and wondered that she herself didn't go upstairs and try to pacify her aunt with outpourings of undiminished affection.

The reception began to wind down; by half past one the last few guests had wandered off to try to find their automobiles. The orchestra and the caterers packed up and headed back to Mobile and Pensacola, and the striped canvas tents drooped in the late night air. The old pungent smell of the Perdido returned and washed over the Caskey landscape, and the detritus of the party—the grandest celebration that Perdido had ever seen—seemed sad and bleak.

Miriam and Malcolm were led upstairs by Queenie, through the wreckage wrought by the ladies of Perdido; past Lucille and Grace and Tommy Lee, sitting next to one another on the edge of Miriam's bed and staring morosely out into the hallway; past Billy Bronze with his arm around Lilah, standing in the door of the guest room. As they went by, Billy grabbed Malcolm's hand and pulled him aside. Queenie and Miriam went on alone. They passed between Ivey and Zaddie—a black Gog and Magog—and into Sister's room. Oscar and Elinor sat on opposite sides of the bed, and Sister, propped against her palisade of pillows and with her hands curled and upturned on the neatly turned-down coverlet, lay cold and starkly dead.

. . .

Miriam and Malcolm didn't go on their honeymoon to New Orleans. It was announced the next day that Sister Haskew had died late in the night. Perdido was told that the anticipation of Miriam's wedding, and the splendid reception, had served to keep Sister alive for no one knew how many months. Sister had died a happy woman, with all her family at her side. She was buried on the twenty-ninth of December in the Caskey plot in the Perdido cemetery between James and Mary-Love.

Arriving home from the funeral, even before she had removed her veiled hat, Miriam marched down the hallway. Without even glancing inside, she pulled shut the door of Sister's room. Taking a key from her pocket she locked the door. Then she dropped the key to the floor, and kicked it through the crack under the door.

. . .

On the second of January, 1959, Miriam went to New Orleans. It was a business trip, but so that it would not appear that she and Malcolm were actually honeymooning so soon after Sister's death, Malcolm remained in Perdido. Billy went with her instead.

. . .

Ivey Sapp retired from service. She had stayed on, she said, only because Sister couldn't do without her. But her feet hurt her, and she forgot things. Besides, she was lonesome without Bray, and all she wanted to do was sit at home and listen to the radio. Ivey had no money at all, but she was so confident that the Caskeys would provide for her, that she did not even bother to mention her needs when she spoke to Miriam. And she was right, for Miriam dropped by her humble home in Baptist Bottom the following week, ostensibly to fetch a recipe for fried corn for Melva, but actually to slip a substantial check under the corner of the tablecloth.

Miriam and Malcolm, tended by Melva, stayed on in the house, which was now considerably diminished in spirit by the departure of Sister and Ivey, who together had inhabited the place for more than a century. Miriam gave Malcolm the room directly across the hall from hers, also at the front of the house; but this was only where Malcolm kept his clothes and a few personal things. He slept with Miriam. After a week, Miriam declared that she didn't know why she hadn't got married before; sleeping with a man certainly was a great deal more fun than sleeping alone. "I don't know what it's gone be like in the summer, though. I guess we're gone have to get an air conditioner in here."

When Sister's will was probated late in the spring of 1959, it was found that with the exception of a substantial bequest to Ivey Sapp, all of Sister's property, holdings, stocks, and cash, went to Miriam. Miriam and Malcolm were now richer than ever. That appeared to make not one whit of difference to Miriam, and Malcolm had no conception of money beyond what Miriam had made plain to him: "Malcolm, you and I have got more than we would be able to spend in a thousand years."

. . .

It was Queenie who seemed most affected by Sister's death. This wasn't surprising, for Queenie's whole life had been wrapped up in Sister for the past ten years. When not actually nursing her, she had kept her company, operating as Sister's eyes and ears, bearing the brunt of Sister's

displeasures, developing her patience and humility to an extraordinary degree.

All deaths are sudden, no matter how gradual the dying may be. For over eleven years Sister had lain in that bed—on those five mattresses and those ten pillows—and the pattern of her days and years had been inexorable and unchanging. Gradually, the oscillations of that pendulum had grown weaker and weaker, but Queenie had hardly noticed the diminution of Sister's strength. And to have the pendulum stop was a great wrench indeed. Queenie had walked away from the funeral wondering what on earth she was to do with herself.

And Malcolm had now left her also. He had been with her for quite a while, and had served to fill out her meager household. Now he was at Miriam's, and had precious little to do with her anymore. Every time Queenie stepped out of her house, her feet seemed to turn to Miriam's; on the rare occasions that she was in Miriam's house she turned toward those stairs she had climbed so many times; the one time she found herself upstairs in that house, she couldn't resist going down to the end of the hall and trying the door to Sister's room. It was locked, and Miriam professed to have lost the key.

So Queenie was left alone in James's house. Because she had always taken her meals either at Elinor's or at Sister's, she didn't even have a cook. She had a girl come in three days a week to clean, and another girl came in twice a week to do laundry, but these weren't Sapps, and Queenie had never grown close to them. Elinor invited her to come and live with them, but Queenie declined: four people in one house was enough, she said. Lucille and Grace offered the permanent hospitality of Gavin Pond Farm, but Queenie turned this down as well: she had never lived in the country, and she was too old to change her ways now. She would have moved next door to Sister's in a minute, but Miriam and Malcolm did not invite her. Queenie even went so far as to suggest such an invitation to her son, but Malcolm replied, "Mama, I have already asked Miriam to ask you, 'cause I miss you, but Miriam says no."

"Why does Miriam say no?"

"She says that you being around the house reminds her too much of Sister. That's why she never even invites you to visit us. Miriam doesn't say much, Mama, but I think she misses Sister pretty bad." With this, Queenie did not argue.

When she was home, which was much of the time, Queenie sat either in her room or on the front porch, waiting for some member of the family to walk by so that she might harness him into inviting her to go elsewhere, or at least into a few minutes' conversation.

Her movements around the house were very circumscribed; she used only her bedroom, the bathroom attached to it, and the front porch. She had established narrow, unvarying routes through the other rooms—it was necessary to go through them to get out the front door, or out the back door—and they were like familiar paths through a forest. One could walk those paths three or four times a day, calm and confident of safety, and never venture off into the dark and dangerous groves that loomed on either side of the needle-strewn track. The kitchen was empty; Queenie had cleared it of all food because she detested roaches. James's rooms, filled with the furniture of James's mother, and all James's things, remained as they were on the night that James died. Queenie had never moved a thing. The extra bedrooms were filling up with boxes of the Caskeys' castoff clothing, now that the closets at Elinor's and at Miriam's had been filled up. Queenie never had guests; when she occasionally did entertain, she did so at Elinor's, receiving her friends there. Queenie never realized that her patterns were becoming as entrenched as Sister's had been. Because Queenie could get around—though she never went far—those patterns were not so apparent to the casual observer—or to her.

At night, Queenie was frightened. She had never slept in a house alone before, and James's house seemed particularly lonely. The rooms were shadowy, filled with curious shapes and noises. Some small animal had got into the attic and there it scrabbled about all night long. Boards creaked beneath the weight of stacked boxes, and every now and then James's delicate china would rattle in the cupboards as if being moved by an unseen hand. When Queenie had undressed she would look out of her window; she saw nothing but the levee quivering in a shroud of black kudzu, and a corner of the DeBordenave house next door, still boarded over. The wind sometimes picked up sand from the yard and flung it against the house, so that she was awakened with what sounded like infinitesimal raindrops.

Sister had once told her, "Old women don't sleep well." Not having experienced this, Queenie had not then believed it, but now she found that Sister's insomnia had come to her. She would lay long hours awake, seeming never to fall asleep at all. That she did so was proved only by the

fact that she awoke in the morning. But how long she had slept, Queenie could never say.

She would lie rigid in her bed, catching every noise in the house and noting it down on a little mental pad, the dimensions of which grew with each succeeding night. Some nights she was troubled with the blowing sand, other nights by the creaking boards, other nights by the rattling crockery. Queenie lay awake and trembling.

Occasionally, new noises came. Something in the house would seem to shake that she had never heard disturbed before. The crystal drops on the candelabra on the dining room table would now and then chime together, as if someone were in that closed-off room, moving restlessly but quietly around and around the table, gently agitating the table and the candelabra with his tread. Or one of the windows opening onto the front porch would shake in its sash as if someone were surreptitiously pacing the porch. Sometimes Queenie thought she could hear the doorknob rattle. One night she heard the window in its sash, and thought, *It's the wind.* A few minutes later, she heard the rattle of the doorknob, and thought, *It must be a change in the temperature.*

Then she was certain she heard footsteps, light and secretive at first, up and down the length of the porch, then heavier, as if in mockery, as if to say, *And what is the explanation for this, Queenie Strickland?*

She quickly picked up the telephone, but just as she lifted the receiver, the sound of the footsteps stopped.

But the footsteps returned the following night, and again when Queenie lifted the telephone, they stopped. This time, however, as soon as Queenie put down the receiver, the knob of the front door rattled frantically. Then the front door was kicked in its frame, kicked, kicked, and kicked hard, and then the steps, up and down the length of the porch, resumed, loud and angry, strides in boots. Queenie followed the sound from one end of the porch to the other. They shook the house. The glass in the windows shook; the candelabra tinkled together; the crockery shook in all the cabinets; the boxes in the bedrooms surrounding Queenie's slid about; and the small animal raced frenziedly about in the attic.

All at once the noise left off. With a rattle, and the echo of a rattle, the house was still. Queenie huddled in her bed, waiting for the sound of the boots to begin again. All remained quiet.

Then Queenie, still staring in the dark, slowly reached for the telephone. Just as she did so, the closed door into the hallway was suddenly framed with a white soft light, as if a lamp in the front parlor had been turned on. Then the light grew stronger, as if perhaps the chandelier in the dining room had been lighted. Another intensification, this one much greater, led Queenie to believe that the hallway light itself had been flicked on.

Other lights came on in the house, until the doorway was framed in a blinding illumination.

Yet all was quiet.

Queenie, not even thinking, rose from the bed, went to the door into the hallway and opened it. She quickly closed her eyes against the glare. Every light in the house had been turned on. She moved to the switch plate in the hallway, and tried to press the off button—but it was already depressed. She pressed the on button, and the overhead light continued to shine. She pressed the off; still it remained. She went into the living room. Every lamp burned, as did the small cast-iron chandelier overhead. Queenie turned the switch on the nearest lamp, but that made no difference. She hurried to each lamp in the room, frantically turning switches. She jerked a cord from the wall, but all the bulbs shone on.

Queenie ran down the hall and into the kitchen. There too the lights burned, even the bulbs in the closets and the flashlights in the drawers. The bathroom lights, the lights in the bedrooms, the ones in the bedroom closets, in the linen cupboards, on the back porch, in the breakfast room, above the portrait of Grace and Genevieve, behind the closed oven door. The tube of the television set glowed brightly white, but there was no image.

Now the light seemed to grow more intense. Every one of the thousands of objects in that house, illuminated from a dozen directions at once, cast a phantasmagoria of shadows on the walls. The light beat about Queenie and was as suffocating as if she were being rolled in cotton. The light grew so bright and white and harsh that the color seemed to drain from everything around her.

Yet all remained silent.

Queenie stood in the doorway of the dining room, just in the spot where James Caskey had fallen dead, and stared around her in a daze. Her eyes were pained with the brightness.

And the lights grew brighter still.

In the living room, there was a small explosion of glass. Queenie instinctively turned toward the sound.

Then there was a smaller burst from behind her, and then another. She turned and saw the flame-shaped bulbs of the chandelier, each burning with an intensity she had never known before, exploding one by one in tiny showers of glass. The light over the portrait of Grace and Genevieve popped with a kind of wet sizzle, and liquid fragments of melting glass poured down over the painted faces of Queenie's sister and niece.

More explosions began at either end of the hallway, in the parlors at one end and in the kitchen at the other. For a moment the television shone with the brightness of the sun, then suddenly burned as intensely black, and collapsed in on itself with a crash.

Queenie ran back toward her room. The overhead light in the hallway burned more brightly as she drew nearer to it. It began to hum, and Queenie barely managed to get inside her room before the fixture exploded. Shining fragments of glass and metal flew into the room along the plane of the closing door.

In Queenie's room, all remained dark. She leaned against the door, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She listened to the explosions, less violent now, more widely spaced, but still continuing. The intensity of light appearing beneath the door was less each time Queenie looked down between her feet.

After a while, the explosions halted altogether. No light came beneath the door into the hallway.

Queenie, not knowing what else to do, returned to her bed.

An electrical storm, she said to herself.

She moved to the window and looked out, hoping desperately to see storm clouds overhead. She saw only stars.

The window was open and the night was still, so Queenie was able to hear the footsteps—heavy booted footsteps crossing the sandy Caskey yards.

She unhooked the window screen and pushed her head out.

There, by the light of the setting moon, she made out the figure of a man striding toward the levee.

He didn't need to turn for Queenie to identify him. She knew him by his stride, and by those boots—boots she herself had purchased.

It was Carl Strickland, her husband, who had been dead these thirty years, drowned in the black waters of the Perdido.

Chapter 76

The Caskey Children

“Mama,” said Malcolm in amazement, “what the hell were you doing over here last night? Did you get mad at somebody or something?”

With the exception of the ones in Queenie’s own room, every light in the house looked as though it had been smashed with a hammer. The fixtures had been shattered, melted, or twisted beyond all further use.

Queenie, following Malcolm around so closely that he bumped into her every time he turned around, said vaguely, “There was some sort of electrical storm last night. Didn’t you and Miriam hear it?”

“Didn’t hear anything, Mama. You got any idea how long it’s gone take me to clean this mess up? Looks like we got to get this whole damn place rewired. Probably never was done right.”

“That was it,” said Queenie, hastily pinning the blame on faulty wiring and abandoning the electrical storm fantasy. “Bad wiring. Lucky I didn’t burn up.”

“Mama, you better go out and stay with Grace and Lucille for a few days and let me take care of all this.”

To this Queenie readily assented, and that very morning, while Malcolm, still puzzled, waded through the wreckage, she drove out to Gavin Pond Farm.

“Here I am,” she cried to Lucille as she squeezed out from behind the steering wheel.

“Mama,” said Lucille, “you should have called so Luvadia could have fixed you something special.”

“I didn’t want to call,” said Queenie, rushing forward to hug her daughter. “Because I was afraid you’d tell me to stay away.”

“Stay away? Why on earth would we say something like that?”

“’Cause I’ve come to stay.”

“Well, it’s about time, Mama. Grace and I have been asking and asking!”

“Not forever, but for a few days. All the wiring blew in the house last night, and Malcolm told me to come out while he was fixing it.”

“Oh, Mama, we’re gone have the best time!” cried Lucille, putting her arm around Queenie’s waist—or as far around it as her arm would go—and walking slowly toward the house.

Queenie, however, didn’t have a very good time. She missed her daily routines in Perdido, as dull as they had been. She missed catching glimpses of Malcolm and Miriam, she missed lunches over at Elinor’s. Perdido hadn’t seemed much when she lived there, but compared to Gavin Pond Farm, it was the center of the universe. Queenie was particularly lonely at the farm, for Grace and Lucille were busy all day long with everything they had to tend—the camellia garden, the orchards, the cattle, the hogs, and the horses. And for some reason it seemed hotter out in the country than it did in town, and so Queenie sat all morning long in the air-conditioned kitchen with Luvadia, watching game shows on television. When Tommy Lee got home in the middle of the afternoon, he kept his grandmother company. One afternoon Tommy Lee got out the shotgun that Elinor had given him the Christmas previous and began to clean it, explaining to Queenie how it was put together and how it worked.

“You remind me of Lucille’s daddy,” said Queenie, and she didn’t say this with pleasure. “Except he was the meanest man ever to walk on the face of the earth, and I don’t believe you are.”

“No, ma’am,” said Tommy Lee, who was fifteen and quiet and shy, even around his grandmother. “I don’t believe I am.”

Tommy Lee Burgess was on the periphery of the Caskey dominion. He hadn’t the Caskey drive, he hadn’t their intelligence or sharpness. Though he was strong, he didn’t play sports in school. Sports would have interfered with his pleasures at home. He coveted those hours after school, when he had time enough to fish for an hour or so in the pond, or swim in the pool, shoot a pheasant in the woods, or ride a horse around and around the pecan orchard with Grace. He was tolerably well liked at school in Babylon, but had few friends. All his allegiance was to his mother and to Grace. With them—and with them alone—was Tommy Lee ever really at ease. His sole companion his own age was Sammy Sapp, Luvadia’s boy, but Sammy spent so much time caddying for Oscar these days that Tommy Lee saw little of him anymore. Tommy Lee was quiet, and a little bumbling, and Lucille and Grace loved him to death.

Queenie had actually never paid much attention to her grandson before. He was too quiet for her taste. Perhaps if he had been ill-behaved,

he would have caught more of her attention. But he had never intruded himself upon Queenie's consciousness, and so had been passed over.

She saw more of him during the time that she spent at the farm than she ever had before. School let out for the summer at the beginning of the second week of Queenie's stay, so after that Tommy Lee was around all the time. The boy had just received his driving learner's permit, and since Grace and Lucille were busy as usual, Queenie volunteered to give him lessons. For several hours each day they bumped around the farm in the older pickup truck, and Queenie never once suspected, through all her careful instructions, that Tommy Lee had been driving since he was ten.

. . .

The damage to Queenie's house was so extensive that two full weeks were required to fix it. It might possibly have taken less time if Malcolm had been content with a patch job, but he insisted on doing it right. Both Elinor and Miriam had surveyed the damage to Queenie's house. "It wasn't an electrical storm that did *this,"* said Miriam firmly. "And Malcolm, it wasn't bad wiring either." Elinor said nothing, but she helped Malcolm to pick out new lamps in Pensacola.

At last, on the first of June, Malcolm called his mother and told her she might return home. The entire house had been rewired, and if even one single bulb burned out in the next three months, he promised he would sit down at the dinner table and eat it in front of polled witnesses.

But Queenie didn't return to Perdido that night, nor the next. Grace and Lucille were pleased, but they were puzzled. Not even the pleasure she got in giving Tommy Lee his driving lessons was equal to the accustomed pleasures of living in Perdido. When it came down to it, country living was very trying for Queenie.

"Mama, you are pining away out here," said Lucille at dinner one day. "Much as we want you to stay with us, now that the house is all fixed up, maybe you ought to think about going back to town."

"I have thought about it," said Queenie uneasily.

"And?" said Grace.

Queenie dabbed her mouth with her napkin and reached for more peas. She said bravely, "I won't go back...because I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" asked Tommy Lee, surprised.

"I'm an old woman," said Queenie, continuing to spoon peas onto her plate, "and I've never lived by myself before. That old house...it's filled

with too many memories. Too many people have lived there. Too many people have died there. And I don't think I can stay in it by myself."

"Well, Queenie," said Grace quickly, "you know you're welcome out here, but I don't think you'd be happy."

Queenie shook her head. "I miss the excitement of town," she admitted. "But Miriam won't have me, Elinor doesn't have the room, and I'm too old to think of moving anywhere else. Besides, James left me that house. He left me everything in it—*his* things, his pretty things that he loved so much. And I owe it to him—I owe *everything* to your daddy, Grace—to stay there and watch over them. I'd never forgive myself if I didn't go back...but I'm so scared."

"I don't understand," said Tommy Lee. "I don't understand what you're scared of."

"I hear things," said Queenie. She smiled, but the smile was pained. "I see lights, Tommy Lee. I know, you think I'm just an old scairdy-cat woman—hearing things that aren't there, seeing things that don't exist. I know they're not there. I know they don't exist. But I still hear them, and I still see them. The night before I came out here, do you know what I saw when I looked out the window in the middle of the night?"

"What?" said Tommy Lee.

"Lucille," said Queenie, turning away from the boy and toward his mother. "I saw your daddy walking right across the yard. Your daddy came up on the front porch of that house and tried to get in. I heard his boots on the porch. He tried to raise the window, but I had it latched. He tried to open the door, but I had it locked. When he couldn't get in, he got mad, and he made all the lights come on and he broke every bulb and every light in the house. There wasn't any electrical storm. The wiring in that house was fine. *Carl Strickland did it.* He's mad, 'cause when he drowned in the Perdido I took Ivey's quarters and I threw them in the water and those quarters kept him down."

"Mama," said Lucille softly. "Daddy's dead. Daddy's been dead for thirty years."

"I know," said Queenie. "But don't you think I'd still know him if I heard him walking up and down on the front porch? Don't you think I'd know him if I saw him? He was walking back toward the levee. He was going back into the Perdido. Those quarters kept him down, I know they did. Oh, Lord, I wish I had 'em back! I wish I had kept 'em in my pocket! If

I go back, I know he'll be on the front porch again at night. When I heard the dishes rattle at night, I knew that was Carl, out on the front porch, rocking in a chair—Lucille, you remember how your daddy always used to sit out on the porch at night and rock. But then he gets up, and walks up and down the porch, looking for a way to get in the house. How can I go back?"

Lucille and Grace said nothing.

"Grandmama?" said Tommy Lee.

"What?"

"What if I went with you?"

Queenie considered this.

"I'd feel protected," she said at last. "Carl didn't come when Malcolm was in the house. It was only when Malcolm got married and moved next door."

"Then I'll go back with you. We can leave tonight. I'll drive you back."

Queenie shook her head. "And then tomorrow you'll come back here. Carl will just be waiting for you to go. It won't do any good."

"But what if I stayed?"

"Stayed?" echoed Grace.

Tommy Lee nodded.

Queenie smiled, then reached over and squeezed Tommy Lee's hand. "You're sweet, but you love this boring old farm. I know how you love it."

Tommy Lee shrugged. "I tell you what," he said. "If Mama and Grace will let me, I'll come stay with you till you feel safe again."

"What about your hunting?" said Grace.

"There's woods right up against Elinor's house. I hunted there with Malcolm one time."

"What about fishing?" said his mother.

"There's the Perdido. It's about as close as you can get."

"You'd leave us?" said Lucille, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Grandmama needs me," said Tommy Lee.

"That I do," said Queenie. "Would y'all give Tommy Lee up for a while?"

Grace sighed. "Tommy Lee can do what he wants."

Lucille nodded acquiescence. "Are you gone send him back if he causes you any trouble?"

"This boy?" cried Queenie. "Who's he gone give trouble to?"

“He’s not yours,” Grace said pointedly. “We’re not giving him up the way you gave up Danjo.”

“I know that,” said Queenie. “I just want the loan of him for a while. When I’ve used him all up, I’ll send him back.”

“Make sure you do,” said Grace sternly. “And what about school in the fall?”

“Lord, Grace,” said Queenie, “the boy just got out of school. Don’t already be talking about going back!”

. . .

Thus Queenie Strickland returned to Perdido with Tommy Lee Burgess. The Caskeys—and the rest of Perdido as well—wondered just what she had done, or said, or given, to pry the boy away from the farm. And they wondered why she wanted him, particularly when she had taken so little note of him before.

Yet, as if to make up for her previous neglect, Queenie couldn’t make enough of Tommy Lee that summer. She bought him three new guns to hunt with; she drove him down to Destin and let him pick out the best set of fishing gear and tackle in the store. She bought him boots for the woods, and a boat for the Perdido. She cleared the boxes out of the bedroom next to hers and moved in the biggest, softest bed she could find. She hired a cook just to fix him breakfast in the morning. Most fifteen-year-olds would have been spoiled and overwhelmed by such attention, but Tommy Lee accepted it with astonishing equanimity. He spent his days hunting and fishing, and his evenings with Queenie, watching television or going out to the Starlite Drive-in for double features. Queenie sat in the car, swatting mosquitoes and forever adjusting the volume control on the speaker; Tommy Lee lay on the hood, his head on a pillow against the windshield, watching the summer lightning quite as much as he watched the picture on the screen.

Queenie often asked Tommy Lee if he weren’t growing tired of her, if he wouldn’t rather be off with some of his friends instead of being chained to a wearisome old woman. Tommy Lee always shrugged and said that he didn’t have any friends, and that he never really got tired of Queenie, except when she asked too many questions.

It was at night, after the ten o’clock news or after an evening at the Starlite, that Tommy Lee proved his real worth to his grandmother. For he left the door to his room open, and at any time of the night Queenie could rise, walk into the hallway, and see him there sleeping. Queenie did that

often. And Tommy Lee's presence in the house, as his grandmother had predicted, kept Carl away.

The summer passed quickly for both Queenie and Tommy Lee, and soon the time neared for Tommy Lee to go back to school. Grace and Lucille began talking about his returning to Gavin Pond Farm, and Queenie began to speak of the superiority of the Perdido school system over that of the one in Babylon.

"It's up to Tommy Lee," said Grace at last, when it became apparent that a sort of stalemate had been reached.

Tommy Lee decided to remain with his grandmother. He transferred to the high school in Perdido, and all during the fall of 1959 and the winter and spring of 1960, he spent five days a week in Perdido and Saturdays and Sundays at Gavin Pond Farm. Every night, however, he slept in the bedroom next to Queenie's. Carl Strickland remained at bay.

. . .

This development was remarked upon widely in Perdido. Yet another Caskey offspring had been given away. In the whole history of the family, the only child to have remained with its parents was Frances, and Frances was now dead. Lilah, though she lived in the same house as her father, belonged not to him so much as to Elinor. When Frances drowned in the Perdido, Lilah had become her grandmother's child; Billy Bronze became a sort of uncle to his daughter. He took no more part than that in her upbringing. Elinor gave permission, Elinor refused requests, Elinor decided what might or might not be done; Elinor bought Lilah's clothes, and paid for Lilah's pleasures. Billy watched his daughter grow up with affection and interest, but not with the love or involvement of a parent.

Perdido rather hoped that Miriam Caskey Strickland would conceive a child—she was nearing forty, and there wasn't much more time for her—because Perdido wanted to make bets on who would end up with it. Miriam, of all Caskeys within memory, was least likely to want to hold on to a son or a daughter if anyone were to step forward with an offer. The often-heard remark was that if it was a girl, she'd trade it for diamonds; if it was a boy, for oil-company stock.

Perhaps that was what Miriam would have done, had she had a child. But Miriam didn't conceive, though she and Malcolm went at it with the application that Miriam brought to everything. Malcolm had been surprised by his wife's change of heart, and even went so far as to question her about

it. “You didn’t always want a baby, you know,” he pointed out. “You said you’d use its head for a pin-cushion.”

“Married people have babies,” Miriam replied, a little uncomfortably. “So I changed my mind, that’s all. I decided that if I was gone go to the trouble of marrying you—and Malcolm, there never *was* a man who was more trouble than you—then I might as well go on and do the other thing too.” Yet no child came, and it began to look as if no child would.

This irked Miriam. She didn’t like being thwarted, and that it was her own body that was proving recalcitrant was a double insult. Malcolm tried to point out to his disappointed wife that a child was only likely to prove a burden to her. Pregnancy itself was likely to interfere with her work; the child would demand time and attention that Miriam would probably resent not giving to the mill and the oil business.

Miriam wasn’t consoled. “I could still go to the office if I got pregnant,” she said. “And if once in a while I couldn’t, I could tell you and Billy what to do and I suppose you would get it done. Once the child came, I’d hire a girl to take care of it.” All Zaddie and Ivey’s brothers had been long married, and already there was a third generation of female Sapps, just pining to be hired on by the Caskeys. “And if that didn’t work out, I could always send it out to Gavin Pond Farm or over to Elinor’s. They’d all leap at the chance for another baby. After all, there hasn’t been a baby around here since Lilah was born.”

But Miriam still didn’t conceive, and finally she was convinced by Malcolm and her own body that it would never happen. This didn’t, however, lessen her desire to have a child. She looked next door, and saw how Queenie had stolen Tommy Lee away from Lucille and Grace. And when Miriam looked the other way, what she saw was Lilah Bronze, just ripe for the plucking.

Lilah was thirteen, in the eighth grade, and was like no one so much as Miriam herself: starchly handsome, proud of her position, enamored of jewels and worldly things, slightly contemptuous of those her own age. In short, Lilah was a child after her aunt’s heart. There was already a certain intimacy between them on account of Miriam’s jewelry collection, which Lilah passionately coveted.

Miriam saw no reason why she should not have Lilah for her own. Certainly, following Malcolm’s arguments, that would be better than giving birth to a child herself. There was no pregnancy to worry about, no infancy

to be endured, and there was not the uncertainty of personality to contend with. She might, after all, have given birth to a child who would turn out to be just like Malcolm—or, worse, like Frances. Just because a woman had carried a child in her womb was no guarantee that she would feel any sympathy with it.

But here was Lilah, and Lilah—to Miriam—was the perfect daughter.

Once she had come to this conclusion, and without having conferred with Malcolm, Miriam lost no time in beginning the task of getting Lilah away from her father and her grandmother.

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Christmas of 1960 was held at Gavin Pond Farm in order to celebrate the new facade that had been raised against the old farmhouse, a feature that obliterated the last vestiges of the original humble old house. The house now had high tall windows and a wide front porch with soaring columns and brick flooring. There was a triangular pediment over the double doors. Grace built a new addition every year or so, and by the time that Lucille had succeeded in properly furnishing and decorating the new rooms, Grace was planning the next enlargement.

Now, one whole room was filled with the Christmas tree and gifts, and the Caskeys had to sit on chairs in the hallway and in the dining room in order to open their presents. Most family members gave each of the others about five gifts—even if Elinor had to buy and wrap all of Oscar's presents from him to her, the gifts were still there.

From Miriam to Lilah, however, there was but a single gift, a small box, hidden away near the base of the tree, and this was brought out at the last. Lilah, expecting scarcely anything of consequence from her aunt, who was known for the inappropriateness of her gifts, was astonished to find inside a brooch of diamonds surrounding a ruby that must have been of at least two karats.

"Is this real?' Lilah exclaimed, holding the bauble high in the air for everyone to see. "Miriam," she cried, looking at the tag to make certain that it was indeed from her aunt, "is this real?"

"It is," said Miriam.

"That cost a fortune," exclaimed Queenie. "Or is that just one of yours?"

"I bought it in New York last month," pronounced Miriam. "Especially for Lilah."

“You’re too young to wear a thing like that,” said Elinor.

“But it’s *mine,”* said Lilah, closing both hands around it and pressing those closed fists happily against her breast.

“Open a safety-deposit box for yourself,” said Miriam. “By the time I was your age, I was already on my second. You’ve got some catching up to do.”

“I am not going to spend good money on jewels for that child that she will never wear,” said Elinor pointedly.

Miriam laughed. “You cain’t insult me, Elinor. And you cain’t stop me from giving Lilah more when I want to.”

“No, I can’t,” said Elinor. “You want to give gifts away like that, go right ahead.”

Afterward, at the dinner table, Lilah contrived to sit next to her aunt. “Why did you give me this?” Lilah asked, still clutching the brooch. “I love it.”

Miriam answered in a voice that was meant to be heard by all the table. “I gave it to you because I want you to move next door with Malcolm and me.”

Lilah’s mouth fell open. She turned her head and looked, not to her father, but to her grandmother, seated at the head of the table. Grace and Lucille had happily relinquished their usual places to Elinor and Oscar, as heads of the family.

Elinor said nothing.

“Close your mouth, Lilah,” said Grace dryly. “You’ll catch flies.”

Lilah shut her mouth.

“Malcolm and I are lonesome,” said Miriam. “Aren’t we, Malcolm?”

“We sure are,” said Malcolm obediently from his forgotten corner of the long table.

“You’ve had Lilah for thirteen years, Elinor. You ought to let me have her for a little while.”

“Lilah belongs to Billy,” Oscar pointed out from the end of the table opposite his wife.

“Lilah does what she wants,” sighed Billy, bowing out. “Or what Elinor wants.”

“Lilah,” said Queenie, “what do you want?”

“I don’t know,” said Lilah thoughtfully. “I’d just be moving next door, wouldn’t I?”

No one bothered to answer that question.

"Lilah?" said her grandmother. Nothing in Elinor's tone gave the child any clue what she wanted to hear.

"Maybe if I just stayed for a few weeks...until spring vacation or something, so Miriam and Malcolm wouldn't be so lonely. Then I could come back."

The Caskeys all looked at one another, each with complete knowledge. Elinor had allowed Lilah to speak, and Lilah had proclaimed her doom. Caskey children, once given up, were never returned. Lilah Bronze, in that one heedless moment, was lost to Elinor forever.

Miriam smiled, and squeezed Lilah's hand. "Just for a few weeks," said Miriam. "And then I'll let you go back. Elinor won't rent out your room, I guess."

No more was said of the matter at the table. Lilah, who thought herself prodigiously smart, understood nothing at all. The occasion—outside of Lilah's own happiness at the prospect of more jewels—turned not somber, but solemn. Something momentous had happened, altogether unexpectedly, and everybody—except the child who would be most affected by it—knew it. Luvadia and Melva continued to bring out plates of hot rolls and to take away empty dishes, and there was talk still of renewed oil leases and proposed trips to Houston and New York. At one point Oscar sent Sammy out to start the car so that it would be warm by the time he wanted to drive up to the golf course in Brewton, but no one thought of anything but Lilah, who had been stolen away in the twinkling of Miriam's acquisitive eye, more quickly and more cleanly than long-armed gypsies could have done it by reaching in an unlatched window and snatching her sleeping from her cradle.

Oscar didn't wait for coffee; he and Tommy Lee and Sammy drove off to Brewton. Lucille and Queenie went to help Luvadia and Zaddie clean up the mess in the hallway. Grace and Billy started to pack the cars with all the gifts. Elinor remained at the head of the table, with her cold coffee before her. Miriam was on her third cup. She had an arm around Lilah, weary and happy in the chair next to her.

"You didn't fight," said Miriam.

"Fight about what?" asked Lilah.

"Shhh!" said Miriam.

Elinor slowly shook her head.

“Why not?” asked Miriam curiously. “You could have fought. You might even have won.”

Elinor paused a long time before answering. One hand was crossed over her breast, the other fingered the black pearls about her neck. “When I gave you Mary-Love’s wedding ring...”

“Yes?” said Miriam, holding up the hand that bore the ring.

“It wasn’t enough, was it?”

“No,” said Miriam, “it wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t enough for *what?”* asked Lilah.

“Be quiet,” said Miriam in a slow whisper, pinching Lilah’s arm as she did so.

“But now,” said Elinor, “we’re even.”

“Yes,” returned Miriam. “I guess we are. How’s that, Mama? After thirty-nine years, I forgive you.”

Elinor said nothing, she just sipped her cold coffee.

For the first time in her entire life, Miriam had called Elinor *Mama.*

Chapter 77

The Song of the Shepherdess

Lilah moved into one of the guest bedrooms of Miriam's house later that Christmas day, "just for a few weeks." Only Lilah herself—of all the Caskeys and most of Perdido—was deceived into thinking that she would soon return to her grandmother and her father.

Those few weeks passed, and Lilah said to her grandmother, "Miriam and Malcolm said they cain't do without me. May I stay for just a little while longer?"

"I'll send your things over," said Elinor.

Lilah's clothes went next door, and soon there was no thought whatsoever—even in Lilah's mind—of her returning. She belonged to Miriam and Malcolm now, and though all the Caskeys ate dinner together at Elinor's every evening, and Lilah saw almost as much of Billy as she had before, she was quite a different child. Miriam pampered her niece, oddly, by neglecting her. Elinor had always kept a tight rein on her granddaughter, for Lilah tended to be forward and precocious, protective of her prerogatives as a Caskey and the richest little girl in the entire county; she was apt to be imperious toward the servants. Elinor had kept these tendencies in check. Miriam did not even try to do so. In her niece, Miriam saw the child she had herself been. She trusted Lilah as she trusted herself. What Lilah wanted was what Lilah needed; what Lilah did was exactly what was required by the situation in question. Lilah, in short, grew unbearable. Yet Miriam saw nothing of this, or perhaps she chose to see nothing. For all the child's arrogance, she was still dear to Miriam, and perhaps dearer to Miriam as she became less and less pleasant to others.

Oscar saw all this, and remonstrated with his wife and son-in-law. Elinor and Billy, he said, ought to step in before the child was completely ruined. Elinor and Billy, however, would do nothing. Lilah now belonged to Miriam, and Miriam was raising her as she saw fit.

"It's none of my business anymore," said Billy. "It might be if Lilah still lived here, but she doesn't."

"Oscar," Elinor pointed out, "Miriam is treating Lilah exactly the way Mary-Love treated Miriam. Lilah will be a carbon copy of Miriam.

Everybody in town sees that. It probably would have happened anyway. There's nothing that I can do about it—and even if there were, I probably wouldn't do it."

If Lilah was worse off from the move, then Miriam, at all events, was better. She now had someone besides herself to take care of. Malcolm didn't count, for Miriam had managed him for a number of years already, and anyway Malcolm didn't require much managing. Despite Miriam's full days at the mill, she drove Lilah to school every morning, and picked her up after school every afternoon. The two of them shopped together in Pensacola for clothes—and sometimes for jewelry. Miriam took Lilah out of school for five days in February and, dragging Malcolm along for the express purpose of carrying packages, they went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and then in Lilah's words, "bought the town out." Miriam, as if she had in truth at last forgiven Elinor for having given her away as a baby nearly forty years before, now regularly called Elinor "Mama" and Oscar "Daddy." Miriam allowed somewhat more familiarity among the households, for it was only she, now, of all the Caskeys, who had the perfect American family—father, mother, and child. Elinor's house, Queenie's house, and Lucille and Grace's farm were all perverted and incomplete reflections of that perfect image. Elinor did not fight her, and Miriam gradually came to look upon herself as the pivot of the family. It was time, in her opinion, that Elinor abdicated.

This assumption of ultimate power in the family tended to make Miriam a bit easier in her manner. A usurper must maintain a cold and unyielding demeanor; a sovereign can afford to be gracious.

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About this time, there was another significant change in the Caskey's way of life, and that had to do with servants. For decades, each of the households had got along with one woman apiece. Because of the sterility of the sandy yards that surrounded the Caskey houses, a single gardener had sufficed for all three. Once again, Miriam was the instrument for the change. When Ivey retired after Sister's death, her niece Melva took her place. Melva was a fine cook, but an indifferent housekeeper. And rather than let Melva go just because she didn't know how to clean rugs properly, Malcolm simply went around to the various Sapps and inquired if there was a girl who *did.* He found one readily, and hired her to do cleaning in the house. Now Miriam had two servants, and that was thought sufficient in a

house of only three persons, especially when Miriam was away so much and when so many of the family's meals were taken next door anyway.

Queenie had hired one girl to cook breakfast for Tommy Lee, but this girl went to school directly afterward, and did not return until the late afternoon. Since Tommy Lee also was away in the middle of the day, Queenie hired another girl—a Sapp, of course—who wasn't much good at anything, but who kept her excellent company, and that was really all that Queenie needed. She didn't like to be in the house alone even in the daytime.

Zaddie Sapp was past fifty, but still very capable of keeping Elinor's entire house going; she had done so for thirty years, and always completely to Elinor's satisfaction. However, Elinor now considered that Zaddie had no need to work as hard as she did, so she sent Malcolm back around to the Sapps. Malcolm returned with a girl to help with the cooking, another girl who did nothing but clean, and a boy to run errands.

After Bray's death, Oscar had borrowed various men from the mill to act as his chauffeur, but this was an unsatisfactory arrangement. Oscar declared that he just didn't feel right unless there was a Sapp behind the wheel. Sammy Sapp had his driver's license, but he was still in the eleventh grade over in Babylon. Oscar convinced Sammy that he had no need of graduating from high school, which wasn't a very good school anyway, and promised to pay him more than he would ever get working at the mill. Sammy, already very attached to Mr. Oscar, didn't need much convincing. Oscar got Sammy a uniform, and bought a new Lincoln Continental in Sammy's honor. Oscar, whose eyes were growing dimmer all the time because of cataracts, had Sammy drive him out to San Antonio, where he consulted an esteemed eye specialist; he was told that an operation was dangerous, and might result in permanent blindness. Of this Oscar said nothing to his family. Sammy drove Oscar all over the countryside, through a dozen states, always on the lookout for new and untried golf courses. Sammy acted as Oscar's caddy. The young black man grew adept at description, for Oscar, slouched in the back seat of the Continental, eyes shaded against the sun, now did not even bother to look out the windows.

Out at Gavin Pond Farm, Grace and Lucille still claimed that they got along with just Luvadia and Escue, but the fact was that Luvadia had three teenage children besides Sammy, and those three were in permanent requisition. Moreover, there were field workers who came to the farm every

day, and men who maintained the heavy machinery, repaired the fences, filled the oil tanks, and doctored the livestock. Workers on the oil rigs south of the farm sometimes wandered up on some excuse or other, and rarely fewer than a dozen persons sat down to the midday meal at Gavin Pond Farm.

After so many years of appearing only a little above the other inhabitants of Perdido, the Caskeys had gradually put away their conservative coarse linen, and now appeared recklessly resplendent. They bought new cars every year; they flew on airplanes in the first-class compartments. When traveling they put up at the best hotels, and shopped in the most expensive stores. Elinor sent Malcolm down to New Orleans once a month and had him bring up a trunk-load of the finest wines and liquors. Elinor entertained businessmen and politicians by the score in the course of a year, and grew so adept at hospitality that she was thought a perfect hostess, because everything was accomplished so effortlessly and with such unconscious grace. Perdido was a small pond indeed, but the Caskeys would have made a very decent showing in a body of water of substantially greater dimensions.

The town might have grown resentful if these changes had not been so unconscious on the part of the Caskeys, if the family's sphere had not enlarged itself so naturally and without their seeming aggressively to seek this upward climb. No change was perceived in their demeanor around the town, and they treated no individual differently from before. If the Caskeys gave a party—and they now did entertain more frequently than before—then the same people were invited this year that had been invited five years before. Only now Perdido was very likely to meet one, or even both, Alabama senators, not to mention a man from Texas who owned seventeen thousand head of cattle, and a woman who called the First Lady of the United States by her Christian name.

. . .

Tommy Lee, of all the family, was least affected by all these changes. He remained shy and retiring. When looked for, Tommy Lee was always found in a corner, as far out of the way as possible. His favorite corners were the river, on which he loved to fish; the woods, in which he loved to hunt; and Queenie's bedroom, where he sat and talked to his grandmother for many hours on end. He wasn't looked down upon, by any means, by most of the family, for his function in keeping Queenie occupied and happy was a noble

one. Queenie had kept Sister company for many, many years; now Queenie was being repaid for that loyalty through the agency of her grandson. And God knew that Tommy Lee was not good for much else.

But Lilah was embarrassed by Tommy Lee. She wished that she had almost anybody else in the entire county for a cousin. He rendered her self-image imperfect. How sophisticated could she be when such a bumbling troglodyte as Tommy Lee was her only teen-aged relative? He wasn't really her cousin, of course, but only her great-uncle's great-nephew by marriage. Whenever anyone at school referred to Tommy Lee as Lilah's cousin, she attempted to explain this rather complicated relationship, but it never did any good. Next day, Tommy Lee Burgess was again Lilah Bronze's cousin. It wouldn't have been so bad if he weren't already getting fat, just like all the Stricklands. Queenie was fat, and Lucille was fat. Malcolm was pretty big, but Miriam kept her husband on the go so much that he didn't have time to eat as much as he wanted. Danjo had sent a photograph of himself and his wife Fred in Germany at Christmas, and he was fat, too. Danjo and Fred had two fat little boys, one of whom was already a graf.

Lilah alternated between spates of badgering Tommy Lee unmercifully and ignoring him completely. When she ignored him completely, he might as well not have existed. She wouldn't speak to him, even when they sat next to each other at the dinner table; her eyes wouldn't focus on him when she turned her head in his direction. When she did take notice of him, it was only to pound him relentlessly with questions she knew he couldn't answer: "Why don't you go on a diet?" "If you won't go on a diet, why don't you try out for football?" "Why don't you ever go out on a date?" "Why don't you ask Queenie if you can drive me down to New Orleans so I can go shopping?"

When Lilah was in the ninth grade—a mere freshman in the high school—Tommy Lee was a graduating senior. He asked her to go with him to the senior prom, but she refused. She would certainly not attend her first school dance on the arm of her cousin! Tommy Lee ended up going alone. Malcolm was a chaperone, and so Tommy Lee sat with his uncle at the side of the room all evening long. Malcolm saw how unhappy Tommy Lee was, and he surreptitiously poured bourbon into the boy's punch.

It was Lilah who convinced Tommy Lee to go to college. "You have *got* to go, Tommy Lee, and that's all there is to it."

Tommy Lee was surprised by Lilah's sudden interest in his future, and secretly suspected that her real motive was to get him out of town. He saw well enough how little Lilah liked having him around, but characteristically, he only admired her for the vehemence of her passion against him. But Tommy Lee still couldn't see the need for college for himself.

"Look, Lilah, I'm not any good at all that business."

"All what business?"

"You know, grades and junk. Besides, Grandmama sort of needs me around here."

"Queenie would like to keep you tied to the foot of her bed, that's what Queenie would like to do with you," snapped Lilah. "And if you let her keep you around here, I will never speak to you again."

"Grandmama's been real good to me," Tommy Lee pointed out.

"If you went to college," said Lilah, "you could join a fraternity."

Tommy Lee glanced doubtfully at his cousin. "You sure somebody'd ask me?"

"Sure," said Lilah decisively. "You know why? 'Cause you're rich. They find out about things like that. Rich people always get asked to join fraternities, 'cause they know rich people can pay their dues and buy beer for the parties. And rich people bring their cars to school and own beach houses to give parties in and all that."

"How would people know I'm rich?" asked Tommy Lee, who never carried more than two dollars in his pocket, even when he went to Pensacola.

"They find out. They look up people's names. There's a big book and it tells if people are rich or not. A friend of mine saw one in a fraternity house one time," Lilah went on confidently. "So if you went to college, you could join a fraternity, and then you could invite me to come up to all the parties they have. There's a party every Friday night during football season, and then the rest of the year there's one every other Saturday."

"Would you come?"

"Of course I would come!"

"Where should I go?"

"You mean where should you apply?" asked Lilah, considering the question. "Alabama's got more fraternities, but Auburn is closer."

"I don't care," said Tommy Lee. "Whichever one you say, Lilah." He understood now that his going away to college would serve a double

purpose for Lilah. It would get him out of town, where he was merely an embarrassment to her, and it would secure her invitations to fraternity parties. To be able, as a mere high school sophomore, to put in an appearance at one of those much-whispered-about orgies of drink and delectably loose behavior, would secure Lilah instant, exalted, and unapproachable stature among her peers.

"Well, until I learn how to drive, you're gone have to come down here and pick me up on Friday afternoon and then bring me back on Saturday. Since Auburn's closer, you better go to Auburn. After I get my driver's license, then maybe you should transfer to Alabama."

Thus it was that Tommy Lee Burgess decided to apply to Auburn; his application, though late, was accepted.

. . .

Grace and Lucille were enormously proud, of course. Tommy Lee was lost to them, that they acknowledged, so the two women took pleasure in the thought of his going away to school and making more of himself than anyone had anticipated.

It was Queenie who was despondent, though she couldn't, in all conscience, deny her grandson permission to attend college. In fact, using all her willpower she refused even subtly to attempt to dissuade him from his plans. She could only moon over him, and buy him more clothes than he could possibly pack in the back of the car. In fact, she bought him a new car, one with a larger trunk for that very purpose. She insisted on going up to Auburn and seeing him installed in a dormitory, though Lilah begged her not to. "Look, Queenie," Lilah said, in as peremptory a tone as Miriam herself might have used, "he's only gone be there for two weeks at the most."

Queenie's heart leaped at this thought. "Do you think so?" she cried. "You mean he'll be so homesick that he'll come right back to Perdido! I never did think Tommy Lee was cut out for college."

"No," said Lilah impatiently. "I mean he'll be moving into a fraternity house. I bet he's Pi Eta. Pi Eta gets all the richest boys. They give a toga party every September. So Tommy Lee will be coming back down to pick me up. He's already promised to invite me. Of course, if he pledges Pi Epsilon, they have a Polynesian night. I'd rather go to a Polynesia party than a toga party, but I still bet Tommy Lee goes Pi Eta."

In the last week of August 1961, Tommy Lee and Queenie drove up to Auburn in Tommy Lee's new car. Queenie saw him installed in his dormitory room, and watched with pleasure as Tommy Lee tried, with but little success, to fit his mountain of new clothes into the slim closet and the single low chest of drawers that was allotted to him. Tommy Lee's roommate showed up too, and Queenie took them both out to a catfish supper.

Queenie spent the night in the Auburn Hotel, and made Tommy Lee stay with her rather than in his room. The next day, Lucille drove up, and was off-handedly introduced to Tommy Lee's astonished roommate as "my farm mama." Late that afternoon, following a tearful farewell, Lucille drove Queenie back to Perdido, and sat with her on the front porch of James's house until midnight.

"I am so lonesome," Queenie said over and over again, "that I just cain't face going inside, knowing that Tommy Lee isn't gone be there."

"You got to go inside, Mama, 'cause I am about dead, and Grace is out there at the farm waiting up for me."

Queenie sighed, rose from her chair, and allowed Lucille to lead her inside the house.

"I could *kill* Lilah Bronze for sending Tommy Lee away like that. And all Lilah wants is an escort to a party where nobody wears anything but a sheet with a grass skirt on underneath it. She could have worn that around the house here, and nobody in Perdido would have said a word about it. But no," Queenie sighed, "she had to send Tommy Lee away."

"Well, Mama," said Lucille without much sympathy, "now you know about how Grace and I felt when you took Tommy Lee away from us."

"Did you?" said Queenie vaguely.

"We sure did," said Lucille as she turned to leave.

. . .

Queenie listened to her daughter's footsteps as Lucille left the house. She heard the front door shut, heard Lucille's tread across the front porch and down the steps. She heard Lucille move across the yard toward her car parked on the road. Lucille's car started up, and soon the noise of the engine was lost behind the screen of ligustrum to the east.

Queenie didn't even pretend to herself that she wanted to sleep. She wanted only to think of Tommy Lee—to think about the fact that he was up in Auburn, in a cramped little cinder-block room in the freshman dormitory,

and not where he ought to be, lying comfortably in the big soft bed in the room adjoining hers; in that dim, safe corner of that old house, in the shadow of the Perdido levee. She lay awake for a long time, thinking of her grandson, remembering with pleasure how many times she had sat at the dining room table and watched him eat his breakfast, how many times they had walked together to Elinor's for supper, how they had played double solitaire in the evening, how they had watched television or the movies at the Starlite Drive-in together, how at least five times every evening they said good-night and kissed each other before laying themselves in their beds. She thought about how every night for three years Tommy Lee had kept Carl Strickland from coming back to that house.

Tommy Lee had protected her, and now Queenie was by herself.

Queenie lay absolutely still, thinking no more of Tommy Lee but only of the fact that she was alone.

She heard, in that stillness, the dishes rattle in the kitchen cupboard. It actually wasn't as much a rattle as just a little vibration, but Queenie had lived too long in that house not to know when the dishes in the cupboards were disturbed. Down at the other end of the darkened hallway, beyond the dark-stained swinging door, in the closed cupboards, James's best china was shaking with the surreptitious footsteps of someone walking as slowly and softly as he could, up and down on the front porch.

Queenie was suddenly smitten with doubt as to whether or not Lucille had locked the front door on her way out. Queenie got out of bed and crept slowly and softly to the door of her room. She peered out into the hallway toward the front of the house. All was dark, still, and silent.

She stepped out into the hallway, and the crystals on the candelabra on the dining room table chimed softly together. Queenie wasn't afraid of *that*, though, for her own footsteps had caused it.

She now stepped quickly toward the front door. She could see it plainly, its white frame glowing in the dimness of that dark house, the white sheers over its glass inserts shaking almost imperceptibly from her footsteps. She could even see the key in the lock. She could even see the key in the lock turning.

Suddenly the whole house was shaking. Just on the other side of the door someone stood turning the key in the lock and stamping up and down on the porch as hard as he could, first one booted foot and then the other, again and again. The key spun around and around in the lock in a way that

keys never turn; it spun quickly and then more quickly, while all the glass and china in the house rattled and chimed in the darkness. One booted foot and then the other continued to stamp up and down on the porch, so that the whole house shook and only Queenie, standing in the open double doors of the dining room, remained still and rooted. That darkened house was filled with music, music of rattling, cracking glass, a shrill tumultuous accompaniment to the tympani of those booted feet on the loosening boards of the front porch. The key still spun around and around, catching light that didn't seem to be anywhere else in the room, and dashing it into Queenie's staring eyes. She dizzily grabbed hold of the doorframe for support. Then Queenie saw the key pop out of the lock, and though it fell on the bare wood floor, Queenie couldn't hear it land for the music was so loud in the house, beating in her ears. All was underlaid with the sound of the Perdido rushing along as the Perdido had never rushed before, or maybe that was only the blood in her head, rushing in pulses to the same beat the boots were making on the porch, and the quaking noise of a thousand pieces of china, and crystal, and porcelain in that darkened house.

A Meissen shepherdess on one end of the dining room mantel and her paramour at the other end bounced up and down to the time of that wild music, and as Queenie stared at the shepherdess with her docile ribboned lamb and at the shepherd with his crook and his pipes, she heard their thin piping music. The shepherd played his pipes and the shepherdess sang a song to the rhythm of the boots on the porch. Queenie listened to that song, and *seemed* to understand the words, and would have caught them for sure had not the Meissen shepherdess and the Meissen shepherd suddenly leaped into the air and fallen down, down past the edge of the mantel, down past the tiles with the painted Holland flowers, down past the polished cold grate, down past the cold ashes, down onto the hard smooth bricks of the hearth. His piping stopped and her song ended; the shepherdess and her paramour were only a little heap of colored porcelain, past song and past repair.

. . .

The Sapp girl who had always fixed Tommy Lee's breakfast arrived the next morning out of habit, even though she knew she wouldn't be wanted. She wished she had stayed home. She found Queenie, cold and dead, on the floor in the open doorway of the dining room. Two quarters, each bearing

the date 1929, were pressed over her eyes, and the key to the house was stuck in her mouth.

Chapter 78

College

Queenie Strickland's will divided her fortune between her daughter Lucille, her son, Malcolm, and her grandson, Tommy Lee Burgess. The acquisition of all that money, stock, land, and returns in the way of royalties and dividends, made no difference to the three legatees. Lucille had so long rested content with Grace, who had come into riches through her father's will many years before, that she didn't care to do anything at all with her new-gotten wealth. Malcolm merely said, "Miriam, you got anything you want done with this money?" When Miriam said no, Malcolm allowed Billy Bronze to continue to invest it as he saw fit. Malcolm was astonished by the monthly reports he always received from Billy, detailing his own fortune, but in the end it had no meaning for him. Money meant even less to Tommy Lee, who was unhappy at Auburn. He did not like his college courses, he still did not make friends easily, he missed Perdido dreadfully, and he mourned his grandmother sincerely. His roommate found it difficult to believe that Tommy Lee's family had any money at all, since Tommy Lee always seemed to be broke. A glance at one of Billy Bronze's reports, however, convinced the roommate of his error. He had never even heard of anyone who was as rich as Tommy Lee Burgess. He gave Tommy Lee a piece of good advice: "Open a checking account here at Auburn, so you don't have to drive back down to Perdido every time you need a five-dollar bill."

Tommy Lee might have benefited further from his roommate's advice on other points, but things happened as Lilah had predicted. Tommy was asked to pledge the Auburn chapter of Pi Eta. For Lilah's sake, certainly not for his own, he accepted and moved from the dormitory into the fraternity house. On initiation weekend he was stripped naked, bound hand-to-foot, tossed into the trunk of his own car, and deposited on a sandbar in the Chattahoochee River.

The following Friday, he drove down to Perdido and picked up Lilah. Toga parties were a thing of the past for Pi Eta, and the fraternity's first party had an antebellum theme. This was even more to Lilah's liking, for it allowed her to wear some of the jewelry she had amassed.

Lilah went to all the Pi Eta parties that spring, and the following autumn she attended all the Auburn football games, whether at home or away, through the courtesy of Tommy Lee. Perdido thought this all a little forward in only a high school sophomore, but Tommy Lee was her cousin, after all, and Miriam merely said, “I wish I had had Lilah’s opportunities when I was her age. I am certainly not gone try to interfere with Lilah’s pleasure.”

In the summer of 1963 Lilah got her driver’s license, and the following fall she simply drove up to Auburn to all the Pi Eta parties. She would not let Tommy Lee come home at all until Thanksgiving, for she did not want to miss any of her weekends away from Perdido. She was furious that the death of President Kennedy caused the biggest of the Pi Eta parties to be canceled.

It came time, in the spring of 1964, for Lilah herself to apply to college. Tommy Lee assumed that she would want to come to Auburn since she seemed to like the place so much. The rest of the Caskeys, however, knew better than to make any such assumption. It wasn’t forgotten that Miriam had not announced her intention of going to school *anywhere* until the very day that she left Perdido. They expected no better treatment from Lilah. And they were right to do so. If Lilah had applied anywhere, she had told no one. Miriam suspected, and even confided to Elinor, “Mama, I think Lilah’s planning something.” She evidently was, for she extracted promises from Miriam and Malcolm not even to *look* at return addresses on the letters that arrived for her in the mail.

Elinor and Miriam would both have denied that they were growing close, but they were mature women, well-settled into their routines, and their identities. Miriam was in her early forties, and Elinor, by anyone’s accounting, must have been at least twenty years older. Miriam loved coffee, in fact was almost addicted to it. She would remain at the dinner table long after everyone else had wandered off. Usually Elinor remained with her, with a cup filled with cooling coffee set before her as a pretense that she remained only for that.

“You’re going to be lonely when Lilah goes away,” Elinor warned her daughter. “You’re going to be as lonely as I was when you took her away from me.”

“You’ve gotten over it,” Miriam said with a shrug.

“Not entirely,” said Elinor. “I still miss her.”

Miriam smiled. “Do you want her back?”

“The way she is now?” asked Elinor rhetorically, shaking her head and frowning.

“What do you mean, ‘the way she is now’?”

“She used to be a sweet child,” said Elinor.

“Lilah was never sweet,” said Miriam.

“Neither were you. But at least I could keep Lilah in check when she lived over here. I didn’t *always* let her have her own way.”

“And I do?” asked Miriam.

“You give her anything she wants. You give her much more than she needs.”

“I like giving Lilah things,” said Miriam. “I wish Grandmama and Sister had given *me* things when I was her age. Everything I’ve ever gotten, I’ve had to get for myself. I’ve worked hard and I’ve earned everything I have.”

“And Lilah hasn’t worked two minutes in her entire life. She’s never earned anything.”

“Lilah graduated valedictorian of her class. I never saw a girl as smart as Lilah. She could have gone to college two years ago if they would have let her in.”

“Lilah never had to work for those grades,” said Elinor. “I’ll say it again. Lilah never had to work for anything. And I think you’ve neglected to point something out to her.”

“What is that, Mama?” asked Miriam.

Elinor didn’t answer right away, but fingered her black pearls with a smile, and seemed to savor the word *Mama.*

“Lilah is the only member of this family who doesn’t have anything in her own right.”

“What does that mean?” said Miriam.

“That means,” explained Elinor, “that everybody else has been left money—and left a lot of money—by somebody or other. Everybody else, even Malcolm and Tommy Lee. They’ve all got money, and a great deal of it. I’ve seen Billy’s reports every month. And Lilah’s the only one of us who doesn’t get one.”

“Aren’t you leaving her anything in your will?” asked Miriam. “She’s your granddaughter.”

“I’m not telling you what’s in my will, Miriam. You’re not going to find that out until I’m dead, and I’d advise you not to be impatient. I may be alive for a long time to come.”

“Well,” said Miriam, *“someone* is going to leave Lilah something. Billy—what about Billy?—who else is Billy gone leave his money to? Or Oscar. Oscar’s got plenty. I’m not worried about Lilah. You don’t think I’m gone let her go without, do you?”

“No,” said Elinor, “I don’t. I just think it might be to her advantage if you pointed out that she ought to feel just a *little* gratitude to you for all that you’ve done for her.”

“I’m not looking for thank-yous, Mama. And if I want one, I’ll get Lilah to send me a Hallmark card.”

“She’ll send it if you buy it—and lick the stamp.”

Miriam called Zaddie out of the kitchen, and Zaddie, without having to be told, brought out a fresh pot of coffee.

“Mama,” said Miriam, “what do you think Lilah’s going to do about college?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask her?”

“It’s none of my business,” said Miriam. “It’s her decision. She knows more than I do about which schools are good and which aren’t. I went to school during the war. Everything’s so different now.”

“You’ll be paying for it. You have a right to know.”

“Tommy Lee thinks she’ll go to Auburn.”

Elinor shook her head. “I doubt it. That’s only what Tommy Lee thinks she’ll do. Anyhow, I don’t think you need to worry about where she’s going to school. I think you ought to be worried about whether you’ll ever see her again once she does go off.”

. . .

The summer drew to a close, and still Lilah had said nothing. Toward the end of August, Miriam had to go to New York, and as a matter of course, asked if Lilah would like to accompany her. Lilah packed her bags, and she and Miriam and Malcolm left the following day. They stayed four nights at the Plaza. While Miriam attended to business during the day, Lilah led Malcolm a merry round down Fifth and up Madison avenues, shopping for clothes. Malcolm carried the packages and signed the checks, and never ventured a complaint as to how much money Lilah was spending.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, Malcolm, laden with packages, staggered behind Lilah into a restaurant on East 57th Street. When they were seated, and she had ordered him a drink, Malcolm said, “You know, Lilah, there’s one thing you’ve forgotten to buy.”

“What’s that?”

“A couple of more suitcases to get all this stuff home in.”

“I won’t have to,” said Lilah.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m staying here.”

Malcolm looked around the restaurant in perplexity.

“At the Plaza? By yourself?”

“No, Malcolm, not at the Plaza and not by myself. I’m going to school here. At Barnard. That’s here in New York. It’s the girls’ college attached to Columbia. It’s a good school. Freshman orientation starts on Monday. I’ve already gotten my dorm assignment. This,” she added, indicating the packages stacked beneath the table, “is my fall wardrobe.”

It was a good thing that Malcolm’s drink was brought quickly. “Bring him another,” said Lilah to the waiter.

Malcolm took a big gulp of his first drink.

“Have you told Miriam?” he asked apprehensively.

“Nobody knows except you.”

“Listen, honey,” said Malcolm. “Everybody in Perdido is gone be real upset when you don’t come back with us. Have you thought of that?”

“I don’t have time to go back to Perdido, Malcolm. I told you, freshman orientation is on Monday.”

“Hey, I guess you knew about this when you came up here.”

“Of course I did. I’ve known about this for months. I was going to have to come up here this weekend anyway. It was just luck that you and Miriam had to go at the same time.”

“But why didn’t you say goodbye to everybody when you went away?”

“Because I didn’t want everybody slobbering over me,” said Lilah. “So don’t you start either, Malcolm. Here comes your other drink.”

It was Malcolm who told Miriam of Lilah’s plans that evening when Miriam got back to the hotel. Lilah sat on the edge of the bed in the next room waiting to be called in. She was, quickly enough.

“Well,” Miriam said curtly, “have you seen your dorm room?”

“No, ma’am,” said Lilah. “They don’t open until Monday.”

“I bet it’s a two-by-four. Mine was. Don’t you want an apartment?”

“Let me stay in the dorm for a while, then I’ll see,” said Lilah.

“Are there sororities at Barnard?” Miriam asked.

“No, ma’am. And I don’t care. I’m too old for that kind of nonsense.”

“Do you want Malcolm and me to wait until Monday and make sure you get in all right?”

“Great God, no!” cried Lilah, who shuddered at the thought of her adoptive parents appearing with her at her first day of college. Then she relented, “Well, stay until Sunday night, and then fly back. Pay the bill here so I can stay until Monday morning, and I’ll be fine.”

And so it was done. Only Tommy Lee was surprised when Miriam and Malcolm returned from New York without Lilah. It was just about the kind of thing the family expected from the girl. Elinor’s dinner table, scarcely recovered from the absence of Queenie, seemed abysmally shrunken.

“Did you ask her,” said Oscar at dinner, “if she is ever gone let us see her again?”

“She said we could go up and see her in New York,” said Malcolm, “as long as we didn’t go to the school. She said she didn’t want to introduce us.” Malcolm shrugged as if to say, *Isn’t that just the way you’d think she’d be?* And everyone at the table nodded, as if he had spoken those words aloud.

“She’s going to be homesick way up there,” predicted Billy Bronze.

“Lilah?” exclaimed Miriam.

“You were,” said Elinor quickly, “when *you* went away to school, and you were only fifty miles away in Mobile. Grace said that when she went down there to see you, you had been crying yourself to sleep every night.”

“I don’t remember that,” said Miriam.

“Yes, you do,” said Oscar. “I never saw anybody so glad to get home that first Thanksgiving.”

“You’d better keep an eye on Lilah,” suggested Billy. “You’d better make sure she’s happy up there.”

“I don’t want to always be on her back,” said Miriam, shaking her head. “She’d think I was trying to interfere.”

“Just make sure you go up to New York as often as you can,” said Elinor, ignoring her daughter’s reasoning. “Keep an eye on her. Malcolm, you can go up there sometimes on your own. Don’t make it seem as if

you're going to see her, pretend you're delivering papers or something. Buy her some new clothes."

"She'll like *that,"* Malcolm said nodding.

. . .

The Caskeys needn't have worried. Lilah got along quite well on her own. She was happy to see Miriam or Malcolm or Billy when any of them was in New York, and once she even went so far as to introduce Miriam to her roommate. She came home at Thanksgiving and Christmas and spring holidays that first year, but spent the summer traveling in Europe. She studiously avoided seeing Danjo, even though his son *was* a graf.

Her second year at Barnard, she moved into an apartment on the East Side, and thereafter Miriam and Malcolm stayed at the Carlysle, only three blocks from Lilah's flat. Her second year she returned to Perdido only for Christmas, and her third year she came home only once—for a weekend in April—and that was because it was Miriam's forty-fifth birthday and Miriam bribed her to come with a double strand of pearls—a sort of birthday present in reverse.

After finishing Auburn, Tommy Lee had returned to Perdido. Miriam had offered him a job at the mill, but instead he went back to Grace and Lucille on Gavin Pond Farm. Grace and Lucille were happy to have him, though rather surprised that he chose to stay with them. "It's so pokey out here," said Lucille. "There's nothing to do. Grace and I thought maybe you'd move up to New York to be around Lilah."

"Lilah doesn't want me," Tommy Lee sighed.

"Some other girl might," said Grace tentatively.

Tommy Lee shook his head.

"Good," said Grace decisively. "Men have no business getting married. Men just cause women trouble, that's all they're good for. I love you, Tommy Lee, but you probably wouldn't be any better than most of them."

"No," agreed Tommy Lee, "I probably wouldn't."

Tommy Lee hunted and fished and did what he had done seven years earlier, before he had gone off to live with Queenie in Perdido. He seemed genuinely happy, and to wish for no other sort of life than the one he led, so quietly, so lazily. Once, for lack of anything better to do, he plied one of Grace's boats down into the swamp south of the farm and, losing himself in the maze of waterways and hummocks there, eventually came upon one of

the oil rigs. This interested him, and he asked questions of the men working there. When they learned that he was a member of the family who owned this land, the men were quite disposed to humor him. He returned to the swamp the next day and the day after that, and soon he had learned all that there was to know. He was able, eventually, to bring Miriam information that proved of considerable value—information that the oil companies had hoped to keep secret from the Caskeys. Miriam realized then that Tommy Lee might prove an asset to her and to the family after all. She talked to him at some length about the oil business that existed on paper, in ledger books, and in contracts, and Tommy Lee picked this up too without much difficulty. He had, for the reason that nothing better presented itself, majored in business in Auburn.

After this, when Malcolm was indisposed or otherwise occupied, Miriam took Tommy Lee with her to Houston or New Orleans or New York. Grace didn't need any prodding at all to add a wing of offices onto the house for Tommy Lee, and she hired Tommy Lee a couple of Babylon high school girls to help with his increasing paperwork.

Tommy Lee made friends with many of the men who worked the oil rigs, and often in the evenings any number of these men would come up to the house and drink beer, tell stories, and chaff Tommy Lee for having so much money and still wanting to make more. Grace and Lucille wandered in and out of these conclaves with huge pots of boiled shrimp, bowls of potato chips, and cases of cold beer. These were good men, Grace maintained, because they worked hard and had no interest in getting married.

But if Gavin Pond Farm often seemed crowded these days, what with Tommy Lee's new friends and all the various workers on the farm, the Caskey compound in Perdido seemed particularly forlorn. Elinor and Oscar and Billy remained alone in the great house, all three growing old together; next door, Malcolm watched television in the evening, while Miriam sat with her papers all spread out on a wide coffee table before the couch.

Queenie's house remained empty. Gradually, it was being filled with the detritus of the wealthy Caskey existence. Old clothes were packed in boxes and stacked in the rooms. Furniture that was no longer wanted was squeezed into rooms that were already filled. Rolled-up fraying carpets were piled up along the walls. Billy kept all the oldest family records there, in neatly stacked and labeled boxes. The kitchen was crammed with old

porch furniture. Queenie's bedroom had more than twenty standing lamps in one corner, each of which was forlornly slated for a repair that would never come. Toys of the few Caskey children were all carefully preserved in Tommy Lee's old room. James's precious gimcracks, which had never been properly stored after his death, slid from their shelves and smashed, one by one. Nobody saw them fall, nobody heard them, but each time anyone went into the house, there was another pile of porcelain, glass, or crockery on the floor. Everything was covered with dust, and rats gnawed away at the corners of closed doors. Not only squirrels, but an entire family of raccoons got into the attic. One of the Sapp girls employed by Miriam wouldn't go near the place because she declared that rattlesnakes bred under the back steps.

One stormy night in 1965, lightning struck one of the water oaks in back of the house, and the top third of the tree broke off and crashed through into what had been James's bedroom. The resulting hole was unsightly, but since it was on the side of the house away from Miriam's it was just patched over with sheets of steel.

In the winter of 1966, while the Caskeys were all at dinner, James's house caught fire. All Perdido's fire-fighting resources were called out, but the house burned to the ground in less than half an hour. The Caskeys watched it, with the appearance of complete impassivity, from the side porch of Miriam's house as Zaddie passed around dessert and Elinor poured coffee from one of James's best silver urns.

Chapter 79

Oscar and Elinor

Oscar was suddenly an old man. The burning of Queenie's house made him so, even though he had thought little of it at the time. He had sat on Miriam's porch, drinking his coffee and calling out hellos to the firemen when Elinor told him which men were there. His only regret had been that so many of the things that had been stored in the house might have done somebody some good if they had only given them away.

"Poor old Queenie!" he sighed. "Poor old James, and Genevieve, and Mama."

Yet he declared that he wasn't sorry to see the house go. It was old, and it was impossible to keep up a house that wasn't lived in. It was a firetrap, and you couldn't walk in the door, Sammy Sapp had told him, without a hundred thousand fleas leaping up out of the carpet onto your clothing. Miriam could hire her a colored man to put in a garden there if she wanted, or they could build a big garage for all their cars. The house wasn't needed, it was bound to have burned down sometime anyway.

After that night, the loneliness of survival seemed to oppress Oscar. He began to miss James, and his mother, and Queenie, with a frequency and intensity that surprised and alarmed him. His sight grew dimmer by the day, and as the real light of the outer world was blocked out, old shadows became visible to him. In moments of stillness in the house, when he was thinking of something else, he heard their voices calling to him. He'd turn off the radio at the end of the ball game, and hear Genevieve Caskey—of all people—calling his name in a distant room. "Come in here!" he'd hear her cry, and he'd almost start out of the chair.

Or he'd dream of his mother, lying motionless in the front-room bed. She'd open her eyes and call to him weakly. And just as he'd get up from the rocker at the foot of that bed, he'd wake up—but still hear Mary-Love's voice, muffled, as from behind the closed door of the front room.

Early every morning Sammy Sapp drove him out to the Lake Pinchona Country Club for a round or two of golf, but Oscar could not see the ball after it left the tee and had but a dim sense of the location of the green. "Where'd it go, Sammy?" he'd ask after every stroke. Regardless of where

the ball went, Sammy guided Mr. Oscar nearer to the green, and at an appropriate spot he would drop a golf ball out of his pocket. Oscar vaguely suspected this subterfuge, but knew he could not play the game any other way. When, by ten o'clock, other players started to arrive, Oscar declared that he was tired and asked Sammy to drive him home.

He had a powerful radio in the sitting room upstairs, and sat beside it all afternoon, listening to whatever ball games happened to be on, squinting at the Mobile papers held carefully up to the afternoon sunlight through the western windows. When there was no ball game, he read the papers in silence. He had tried to reconvene his domino group, but his remaining cronies were as blind as he, and they found that at night they often miscounted the spots on the old yellowed ivories.

Billy and Miriam kept him up on the news of the mill and of the oil business, but Oscar listened with only half an ear. He had little interest in that anymore. His only real concern was for Tommy Lee and Lilah: he wanted to know when they were going to find mates. "We need us some great-grandchildren, Elinor," he made no scruples about saying. "We need Tommy Lee and Lilah both to find somebody and settle down. And give us some more babies."

"So we can steal them, you mean," Elinor laughed.

"It's been so long since we had babies around here," said Oscar. "This old house is so dead, and Miriam's isn't any better. Too late for Miriam to have children, I suppose."

"Yes," said Elinor.

"And I don't suppose Billy is ever gone get married again."

"No," said Elinor.

"We're gone be awful lonesome here," said Oscar, "if Tommy Lee and Lilah don't get on with it."

"They're still young, both of them," Elinor pointed out.

"I know, I know, but if they don't hurry up, it's not gone do us any good when they do."

He wouldn't have anything to do with people he hadn't known for many, many years. He knew people only by their voices, and those new voices were unfamiliar and discomforting. He declared that the Sapp girl who did the cleaning for them had no idea in the world how to make up a feather bed, so thereafter Elinor and Zaddie made up Oscar's bed for him, plumping his four feather mattresses in a fashion that was satisfactory to

him. In the late afternoon, Sammy would drive Oscar around town in the back of the Continental. Sammy described what he saw on both sides of the street. “Here’s Mr. Cailleteau coming out of the drugstore, Mr. Oscar, wave out the left window. And Miz Gully is coming out of the Piggly Wiggly parking lot in their new car, it’s a red Chevy. She didn’t see us so you don’t have to wave...”

Oscar wouldn’t come down for guests, and when there was a stranger at the table he always excused himself as soon as possible. Sometimes, declaring himself unfit company, he simply had Zaddie bring his dinner upstairs, and he ate it while listening to the television news. Zaddie sat by him at these times and talked with him so that he’d have company—and so that if he upset his food or needed something she could take care of it without a fuss.

It was a good thing that Zaddie had so many of the younger Sapp girls under her, for increasingly her time was taken up with Oscar. He wanted her during the day to keep him company, and talk to him. They watched *As the World Turns* together, and made predictions as to what would happen next, and expressed nearly constant disapproval of the evil characters’ actions. When the Mobile *Press-Register* arrived about three o’clock, Zaddie read it aloud to him. He still made a pretense of trying to read it himself, but Zaddie invariably snatched it out of his hands, saying, “Mr. Oscar, I’m not gone let you sit there and hog that paper. I want to see what’s in it, too. So you just sit back and let me read it out loud. You want the front page or the obituaries first today?”

Together, Oscar and Zaddie followed the whole Alabama civil rights business with all the intensity and interest with which they followed the twelve-thirty soap opera.

“Mr. Wallace,” Oscar declared, “is coming down hard on your people. Don’t you think you and I better send Sammy up there with a letter or something and ask him to ease up a little bit?”

“You write the letter,” said Zaddie, “and I will pay for Sammy’s gas.”

“Are you looking for equality, Zaddie?” Oscar asked, with a little of his old high-flown courtliness.

“Equality with what, Mr. Oscar? Equality with who?”

“Don’t you want to be better paid? Don’t you want not to have to pay your poll tax? If all your people voted, Zaddie—if they didn’t do anything but register all the Sapps in this town—why you could take over. You could

have a colored mayor, and a colored sheriff, and a colored I-don't-know-what-all."

"I guess we could," said Zaddie.

"Then do it. If you did it, *you* could be the mayor, Zaddie. I'd vote for you. So would Elinor. And Miriam and Malcolm, too. You'd be the first colored female mayor in Alabama, I bet."

"I bet I would," said Zaddie. "But who'd read the paper to you every day?"

"I don't know, Zaddie, I don't know. Maybe you ought not run for office after all. I wouldn't feel right if I didn't hear the obituaries every afternoon. Maybe you ought to give up this idea of politics. But I tell you what: in my will, I'll leave you enough money to start up a campaign and beat Mr. Wallace out of office. I bet you could turn Selma and Sylacauga right-side up again."

. . .

In the evenings after supper, Oscar went upstairs to his sitting room, closed the door, and turned on his radio. He listened to ball games in far-off places. Billy and Malcolm would often be next door, watching television together. Miriam and Elinor would be downstairs, lingering at the table. Oscar's relish for company was weakening. There wasn't anyone his own age, of his own generation, except for Elinor. James and Mary-Love were long-dead, and he thought of them as dead. That is, he never expected either of those two to walk in the door and demand something of him. But Sister and Queenie were another matter. He frequently found himself straining to catch Queenie's shrill laugh from the screened-in porch, or Sister's loud complaints from next door. He turned up the radio louder at his side, as if its volume—rather than death—prevented him from hearing them when they called.

It was only late at night, when the lights had been turned off and the room lay shrouded in real darkness, not just the darkness of his own dim vision, that Oscar became somewhat his old self again. Only Elinor was happy witness to this small, nightly transformation. Oscar and Elinor talked long into the night, of their family, what Lilah must be doing in New York, how Miriam and Malcolm were getting along, the next round of improvements at Gavin Pond Farm. They talked about the town, how the Piggly Wiggly parking lot was to be enlarged, how a fourth third-grade teacher was going to be needed soon, how they ought perhaps to donate

some money to have the town hall clock and bells repaired. They traded gossip. Elinor got hers from all over the white community. The black community news filtered into Oscar's ears through the willing agency of Zaddie Sapp, mostly during the commercials of *As the World Turns.*

Oscar spoke volubly and without restraint with his wife as they lay in bed together, usually with Oscar on his back and Elinor turned toward him on her side, one arm thrown lightly across his chest. When Oscar grew tired at last, he merely interrupted either his wife or himself with a curt "Good-night, Elinor," and fell immediately asleep.

Only once did Elinor refuse this dismissal, and that was on Christmas night of 1967, after they had all spent the day out at Gavin Pond Farm. "Don't go to sleep yet, Oscar. I want to talk to you."

"I'm tired, Elinor. What's it about?" he asked impatiently.

"Your eyes, Oscar. Your eyes were bothering you today. I could see it."

"Everybody could see it, Elinor," said Oscar after a minute. "They'd have to be as blind as I am *not* to have seen it."

"It's gotten worse, hasn't it?"

"Yes. These things do get worse. They don't get better."

"Oscar, there's no point in snapping at me."

"Then let's not talk about it, Elinor!"

"We have to," said Elinor, squeezing his arm. "Soon you're not going to be able to see at all."

Oscar was silent for several moments, then he said in a low voice. "You remember when Sammy and I drove out to Texas about five years ago, 'cause I said there was all those golf courses out there I hadn't been on yet and I wanted to see them before I died?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't go out there to play golf. They've got *terrible* courses out in Texas, and everybody in the world knows it. So I didn't go out there for that. I went out there to see a doctor, a man at Texas A&M Hospital. And I saw him, and he said I could have the operation, but that there was a pretty good chance that I'd come out of it totally blind. So I hopped in the car, and I said, 'Sammy, let's go home. I'm tired of Texas.' I wasn't deceiving you, Elinor. I just didn't have the heart to tell you."

"Oscar, I knew all this."

"How'd you know?" Oscar asked in surprise.

“Sammy told Zaddie that he had driven you to a hospital while you were in Texas, and I made him remember which hospital it was. So I called them up, and I talked to your doctor and he told me.”

“Good,” said Oscar. “I didn’t like deceiving you.”

Elinor hugged him close. “Oscar, I’d like to see the day that you put one over on me.”

“Me too, Elinor, me too. Can I go to sleep now?”

“No,” said Elinor, drawing back. “I talked to that doctor again last week.”

“Why’d you do that?” Oscar asked, now alarmed.

“I told him you were getting worse. He said you should go out and see him again. Things may have changed.”

“Things *have* changed. I’m worse. I’m a lot worse than I was five years ago. Elinor, do you have *any* idea how much I dreaded going to see that man, how much it took out of me? I don’t think I could go back out there by myself.”

“You’re not,” she assured him. “I’m going with you.”

“Would you?”

“Of course, I would. You and Sammy can sit in the front seat, and I’ll sit in the back seat with your feather mattresses. Oscar,” laughed Elinor, “what on earth do they think at the Hilton when you walk in with one suit bag and a colored man carrying five feather mattresses?”

“They say, ‘This way to your suite, Mr. Caskey.’ I always get a suite, ’cause then they don’t care *what* you do. They’re used to crazy old rich people, I guess. Poor old Mama,” he sighed.

“Poor old Mama what?”

“What would she think of me now? A crazy old rich man, being carted around the South by Luvadia Sapp’s boy in a car filled with mattresses and pillows. Mama wasn’t sick a day in her life—not till she died, anyway. What would she think of me, so blind that I’m even afraid to get up out of the chair if somebody else is in the room? Afraid I’ll bump into something, and they’ll find out I cain’t see anything at all.”

“That’s why you and I are going to Texas,” whispered Elinor.

“Don’t talk to me about it,” pleaded Oscar. “Just set it all up. But don’t tell me when it’s gone be. Don’t tell me you’ve made an appointment and reserved a suite at the hotel. When it’s time to go, just say, ‘Oscar, put on your pants, we’re going for a ride.’ And all the way out to Texas, I’ll just

pretend we're on our way to Pensacola for supper." He laughed at his own weakness.

"That's just how we'll do it," agreed Elinor. "All right, Oscar, you can go to sleep now. All that unwrapping you did today must have tired you out."

"I made Zaddie sit by me," said Oscar, "so she could tell me what everything was. The only time she didn't have to tell me was when I opened Tommy Lee's present—those damned pajamas he gets me every year. Always the wrong kind. That boy doesn't have the first—" He broke off suddenly.

"What's wrong?" asked Elinor.

"Elinor, you got to promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't ask what. Say you'll promise me."

"I'll promise you. Whatever you want, Oscar. What do you want me to promise?"

"Promise me that you'll let me die before you do," he said. "Promise me that you won't make me live on in this big old house alone. Let me die first. Promise me that."

Elinor pressed her face against his shoulder.

"I promise," she said unhesitatingly, and in such a voice that gave him confidence. "I'll be here to take care of you for as long as you live."

"I couldn't do without you," said Oscar quite matter-of-factly as they lay together there in the dark. "I wouldn't even want to try." Elinor said nothing, but she snuggled closer to her husband. "Why did you come?" he asked.

"Come? Come where?"

"Come here to Perdido," said Oscar thoughtfully. "Mama was always asking that question: 'Why did Elinor come to Perdido?' I always said, 'Mama, I don't care. I'm just glad she did.'"

"Mary-Love wasn't glad," said Elinor dryly.

"No, she wasn't." Oscar admitted readily. "She thought you came on purpose, just to snag me."

"How do you know I didn't?"

"Did you?" he asked with calm curiosity. "Did you hide yourself up in the Osceola for three days—"

"Four days."

"—four days, waiting for Bray and me to come along in that old green boat? Remember that old boat?"

"I do," said Elinor.

"Well, did you? Were you lying in wait for me there, like Mama said you were?"

"Oscar, I never wanted anything in this world besides you," Elinor replied evasively.

"And you wanted to be rich, and you wanted to have a big family so you could be head of it. And you wanted to make everybody dress up for dinner, and you wanted—"

Elinor laughed. "Of course I wanted all those things. What woman in her right mind *wouldn't* want them? But those things wouldn't have meant anything to me if you hadn't been here."

"And when I die?" Oscar asked lightly. "And when you're left alone —'cause remember, you just promised I'd die first—and when those things are all you've got left, are you saying they won't mean anything without me?"

"No," said Elinor. "I'm not saying that. And, Oscar, I certainly don't intend to dress you up in your coffin, see you put down next to Mary-Love, and then drop dead across your grave, either. But when you're dead, those other things will start to fade. I know they will. And when they've faded to nothing, then I'll die, too."

"Fade away..." breathed Oscar softly. "Oh, Lord, Elinor, we're so old!"

"That's what happens here," said Elinor.

"Here?"

"Up on dry land, Oscar..."

"That's right," said Oscar. "Up here on dry land. You still didn't answer my question, though."

"What question?"

"Mama's question. When Bray and I were riding through the flooded streets of this town and we rowed by the Osceola, you were sitting in your room on the edge of the bed. I saw you. You know, Elinor, I cried the day they tore that hotel down. I cried because I remember that Easter Sunday morning when I rescued you out of that corner room. But that's the question: did I rescue you? Or were you just waiting there for me to come along? All this—this house, and the mill, and Gavin Pond Farm, and all these rich, rich relatives we've got, oil wells, and stocks and bonds, and

Miriam's forty-thousand safety-deposit boxes filled with jewelry, and hot-and-cold running servants, and you and me lying here in this bed in the dark. Elinor—is this my doing because I rescued you, or is this your doing because you were lying in wait for me like Mama always said you were?"

"Your mama," said Elinor, turning over on her other side, away from Oscar, "always did think that she was right, and that everybody else was wrong. Well, Oscar, sometimes Mary-Love *was* right about things."

Chapter 80

Oscar's Pajamas

So, without telling Oscar, Elinor made the appointment with the doctor at Texas A&M Hospital, and one day in February she said to her husband, "Oscar, pull on your pants, we're going for a ride." While Oscar was dressing, Elinor and Zaddie stripped the bed. Sammy Sapp and Malcolm took Oscar's five feather mattresses and his four favorite pillows and somehow fitted them into the trunk and the back seat of the Lincoln Continental, leaving enough room for Elinor to squeeze in the back.

"We're just going to Pensacola for supper," Oscar called out to Miriam and Malcolm, who, as Sammy whispered to him, were standing on the front porch of their house. "But y'all don't wait up."

Every ten miles Oscar turned and asked, "Elinor, are we in Pensacola yet?"

"Not long, Oscar. Sammy, what does that sign say just ahead?"

"Pensacola. Ten miles."

"Be patient, Oscar, we'll be there before you know it."

This obvious game tickled Oscar, and he kept it up at wearisome length all the way to Texas. Elinor had booked the largest suite in the biggest hotel in Houston, and Sammy and three bellboys carried up the mattresses and put them in the place of the regular ones. Elinor made up the bed herself, and informed the maids that she would continue to do so.

Oscar saw the doctor the next day, and the doctor pronounced him worse. An operation was more dangerous now than it would have been years before, the chances of total blindness greater. On the other hand, Oscar was nearly blind now, and the operation could not therefore be regarded as much of a gamble.

"He'll do it," said Elinor, and Oscar nodded reluctant agreement.

The operation was performed a week later. Oscar and Elinor and Sammy meantime remained in the hotel, none of them happy to be away from Perdido for so long. The operation was performed, and Oscar emerged from it totally blind.

. . .

The mattresses were put back into the car, and Oscar and Elinor, with Sammy behind the wheel, headed back to Perdido. “That supper in Pensacola disagreed with me, Elinor,” was all that Oscar said.

As Elinor led Oscar up the sidewalk to the house, she said to him, “We’re not going to keep this a secret, Oscar. You know that.”

Oscar nodded. “When people see me fall headlong down the town hall steps, they’re just gone *know.”*

But things were better for Oscar after that, as it turned out. No vision at all was only a little less than what he had got along with before, and at least now there was no disheartening deterioration. He no longer had to make any pretense about his need for help about the house. He had an excuse not to talk to visitors. All his subterfuges and fictions were laid aside with his thick-lensed eyeglasses; he had need of none now. He didn’t come down to dinner at all anymore, but remained in his sitting room with Zaddie for company.

Elinor did not seek to halt Oscar’s withdrawal into his own world. A week might pass without his leaving the bedroom or his sitting room. The rest of the house grew unfamiliar to him, and to go through other rooms was as trying an adventure for him as attempting to walk down to the Ben Franklin store without a guide. That suite of rooms at the back of the second floor began to smell of Oscar as Sister’s bedroom had smelled of her. On fine days, Zaddie would walk him out to the car, and Sammy would drive him around town and then out to the Lake Pinchona Country Club. Sammy would park the Continental next to the golf course and Oscar would sit very still, smelling the newly mown greens and listening with pleasure to the thwacking of the balls and the intermittent cursing of the players. They’d call out to him as they’d pass by, “Hey, Mr. Caskey, don’t you want to get out of that hot car and come join us?”

“Who is that calling to me?” Oscar would cry in return.

“It’s Fred Jernigan and Roscoe.”

“Fred, Roscoe, sure, I’ll come out there, if you boys will promise to play with your eyes shut tight.”

“We promise,” Fred and Roscoe would always laugh, and then move on to the next hole.

Billy Bronze was of some comfort to Oscar in the evenings, for Billy would listen to the ball games with him. But for the other members of the family, Oscar had little patience. Miriam sometimes came to visit for a few

minutes—with Malcolm in tow—and would spill out a little news of the mill. Oscar, however, had lost all interest in the Caskey businesses, and only wanted to know what they heard from Lilah, whether she was married yet, if she was seeing people, or if she was interested in any one particular boy. Grace and Lucille and Tommy Lee came much more rarely to Perdido now that Queenie was dead. When they did come, they all paid a visit of respect to Oscar, but had little to say to him. On one such visit, Oscar turned to Tommy Lee and asked, "Tommy Lee, you got any little girlfriends yet?"

"Don't you speak to him of girlfriends, Oscar," Grace snapped. "We don't want him starting to bring home girls we don't approve of, girls we don't know anything about. When Tommy Lee wants to get married, he'll come and tell his farm mamas that he's ready, and Lucille and I will comb the countryside till we find the right one. Isn't that right, Tommy Lee?"

"That's right, Grace," Tommy Lee agreed passively.

"Tommy Lee can marry when Grace and I are dead," said Lucille complacently. "There's no need for him to think about it before then. Tommy Lee is rich," she added, although it wasn't exactly to the point of argument, "and he can have anybody he wants."

"I don't want anybody," said Tommy Lee. "Except Lilah, maybe."

"Well," said Grace, "if Miriam could marry Malcolm, then Lilah could certainly marry you."

"That's what I thought," said Tommy Lee, who had a fairly accurate image of himself and his capabilities. "And that's what I told her."

"And what did Lilah say?" asked Oscar.

"She said, 'Not in a million years.'"

"Grace, speak to Miriam about this," Oscar suggested. "Maybe Miriam could talk some sense into that girl. Tommy Lee, if you and Lilah got married this year, you could start having children before I die."

"I sure would like to oblige you, Oscar," said Tommy Lee.

"I'd rather you gave me a little baby for Christmas than those damned old pajamas."

Zaddie, who had been sitting silently by throughout this little audience, indicated by a motion of her hand that Oscar was weary. Grace, Lucille, and Tommy Lee stood up at that moment, and with only perfunctory ceremony, took their leave.

. . .

The winter of 1968 was particularly cold and wet in south Alabama. Everyone suffered through days of freezing rain, high winds, and cloudy chill evenings, imagining that the next day would dawn clear and warm. It rarely did. Out at Gavin Pond Farm, Lucille was worried about some new, small, and very rare camellias she had just set out in the fall. She looked at them carefully every day, and every day grew glummer and glummer, for the expensive plants looked as though they were dying. She went out in the rain every day, shoveled new soil around their roots, carefully covered them with plastic, and constructed small protective fences about them. Toward the end of February, when warmer weather was *sure* to come at last, Lucille's efforts proved a success, and the rare camellias gave every indication of survival. Lucille, however, was now laid up in bed with what seemed to be a severe cold. This, after hanging on for a week, was diagnosed as pneumonia, and she was placed in Sacred Heart Hospital in Pensacola. Grace, Tommy Lee, and Elinor worked out a schedule to spend alternate days with her so that she would never lack for company.

Oscar complained to Elinor about being left alone. "Let Grace or Tommy Lee go. I need you here, Elinor."

"Grace has a lot to do at the farm, Oscar. And Tommy Lee has plenty to keep him busy. I'm glad to go, and I have to do it. Lucille would fret if there wasn't somebody by her bedside. And I don't know what you mean by being all alone anyway. Isn't Zaddie in here every minute of the day when I'm not? Besides, they shoo us out of that hospital at eleven, so I can be home at midnight."

Visiting hours were over much earlier in much of the hospital, but Lucille had a private room, and in any case the Caskeys were a well-known family in the area. There was no trouble made about these quiet visits beyond the stated times.

On these evenings when Elinor was away at Lucille's bedside, Oscar was at a loss. Football season was over, and he was no aficionado of basketball, and so the radio was of no use to him. He pouted at being alone. He'd tell Miriam and Malcolm and Billy to go out somewhere and eat. If Elinor wasn't going to be around, he didn't want any of them. Zaddie brought up his dinner, and then sat with him through the evening news, but directly afterward Oscar sent her down with the tray. "Come back up and turn down my bed, Zaddie. I've got weary bones today."

“It’s the rain, Mr. Oscar,” said Zaddie comfortingly. “It’s the rain makes you tired all the time.”

“Maybe. Maybe it is,” said Oscar, listening for a moment to the sound of the rain beating against the sill of the sitting room window. “Where’d they go out to dinner? You know?”

“They all went out to the farm, Mr. Oscar. Tommy Lee shot some birds, I guess.”

“Not hunting season, though. That boy’s gone get in trouble one of these days. So they’ve left us all alone, Zaddie.”

Zaddie did not go downstairs with the tray, for Oscar seemed disposed to talk. She went into the bedroom and turned his bed down as he liked it.

“That was a good supper, Zaddie!” he called out.

“Glad you liked it,” Zaddie called back.

“Just you and me here tonight, Zaddie. You and me and the rain.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Elinor tells me the rain has beat down all the azaleas this year.”

“Yes, sir. Not much left.”

“That’s too bad. Elinor’s always been proud of her azaleas.”

Zaddie came back into the sitting room. “You going right to bed, Mr. Oscar?”

“I think I will. All this rain is making me sleepy.”

“Me too, Mr. Oscar. You need any help in getting in your pajamas?”

“No, I’ll be all right. You go on downstairs. You got a little Sapp down there to help you clean up?”

“I sure do. I got two of them sitting there in the kitchen watching the television.”

“All right. I tell you what, Zaddie. You go on down there and get things cleaned up, then come on back up here and just check and make sure I’m all right.” Oscar didn’t want Zaddie’s help in getting undressed—that would have been humiliating. On the other hand, he almost always now needed Elinor’s help to untie his shoes, unbuckle his belt, and find the pajamas he liked best. He wasn’t so certain that he could manage all that by himself.

“You need the light, Mr. Oscar?” Zaddie asked as she picked up the tray.

“Light’s not gone do me much good, Zaddie,” Oscar replied in a low, weary voice. “You go on downstairs.”

“I’ll be back up in a little while and make sure you’re comfortable, Mr. Oscar.”

Zaddie went downstairs, leaving Oscar in the darkness of the second floor. The rain had increased in intensity in the past half hour. Feeling his way from the sitting room into the bedroom, he passed by the window and was splashed with water. He jerked his arm away, then squeezed his wet sleeve around his wrist. He seated himself on the edge of the bed, and pulled his shoes off without bothering to untie them. He removed his socks, and then went carefully to work on his belt. After a few moments, he was relieved to hear it unbuckle. He removed his pants and his undershorts, then undid the cuffs of his shirt, allowing the links to drop to the floor. He took off his shirt and his undershirt and then shuffled to the dresser. He opened one drawer and felt about for his underwear; but that drawer seemed to have nothing but socks. He opened the drawer below that, and found a pair of pajamas. He put them on, but something about their feel and their odor convinced him that this was not one of the two pairs that he was most used to. He went by slow steps back to the bed and climbed in, pulling the covers up to his chin. Had it not been for the unfamiliar pajamas, he would have been very content. Elinor had made the bed that morning just the way he liked it; Zaddie had turned it down, fixing the pillows just as he always wanted them.

It was still early in the evening, but because the noise of the rain kept him from hearing—as he might have heard—Zaddie and the young Sapp girls in the kitchen, it seemed very late. Oscar felt that he could have fallen asleep immediately, had it not been for the unfamiliar pajamas. These were probably a pair that Tommy Lee had given him the Christmas before. Tommy Lee, Oscar reflected yet once again, always gave him pajamas, and always the wrong kind. He wondered how many pairs of this wrong kind of pajamas had burned up in James’s house. Hundreds, probably. Dressersful, trunksful of pajamas, still in their cellophane packages, still bearing shreds of paper and tape and ribbon.

But not even the feel of the unfamiliar, wrong sort of pajamas was enough to overcome the soporific influence of the beating rain, and Oscar Caskey soon fell deeply asleep.

. . .

He awoke sometime later—how much later, he had no way of knowing. It was still raining. The house still felt empty; Elinor was not yet in bed beside

him. He sighed, and now wished he hadn't gone to bed so early. He wondered if Zaddie had come back upstairs to check on him. He wished he knew what time it was. One of the problems about being blind was that you never knew what time it was. You lost your ability to gauge passing hours by changes in shadow and light. And now the pajamas felt more uncomfortable than before. Pajamas ought to be made out of cotton, pure cotton, and nothing else, Oscar thought. These were obviously something else; they would keep him awake all night. The more he thought about the pajamas, the more convinced Oscar became that he would have to get up out of bed and find one of the right pairs. Ones that were all cotton, that hadn't been starched, that had been worn in this bed before. While he lay in the bed wondering if he should get up that very moment or wait for a little bit, he began to think that he heard voices underneath the rain. Perhaps Elinor had returned, and was talking to Zaddie downstairs. The sound of the rain was loud, however, and he couldn't even be certain that his ears weren't playing tricks on him.

"Elinor!" he called. His own voice sounded muffled and dim in the heavy atmosphere. She wouldn't have heard him even if she had been in the next room. "Elinor!" he called again, this time more loudly.

A voice seemed to answer in reply. But whose voice, and where it came from and what it said, he couldn't determine. It was the rain, beating against the sills, foaming down the screens, spilling onto the baseboards, that prevented his knowing who else was in the house.

He lay still, forgetting about the pajamas, and listened, straining to hear a repetition of those voices. His eyes were wide open and staring, but he saw nothing at all.

Oscar!

He heard that. He heard his name called. Whoever had called him was on the second floor, not in the sitting room, but out in the hall. Down the hall, probably all the way at the other end in the front room.

"Elinor?' he said feebly, knowing it was not Elinor, and not Zaddie, who had called to him.

The voice did not come again. Oscar tried to remember it, tried to recreate in his mind, over the noise of the rain, the precise configuration of those two familiar syllables so that he could know who was calling him from the front room. *Billy,* he thought at first. Billy could have gone down

the linen corridor from his room to the front room, opened the door, and called his name. Yet it wasn't Billy's voice. Billy said his name differently.

"Who is it?" Oscar called, and pushed back the covers on the bed.

It might have been Miriam, or Malcolm, or even Grace, Oscar thought feverishly—but what would any of them be doing in the front room? No one went up to the front part of the house anymore. Wasn't it strange how patterns become ingrained in a reduced household? There were three bedrooms up there, at the front of the house, and they were never used. Oscar had even heard Zaddie say she didn't make up the beds there anymore, because if she did the sheets would get moldy before anybody slept on them again.

Oscar eased down off the bed. The floor was cold, and felt damp beneath his bare feet. He took a few steps toward the door to the sitting room, stopping suddenly when he trod painfully on one of his cuff links. He kicked it aside, and went on, waving his arms before him. The air was chill; Zaddie ought to have closed more of the windows, he thought. When he had felt his way to the door he paused, grasping the frame on both sides; he bent forward and listened. He heard nothing but the rain. Though there was but a single window in the sitting room, the noise of the rain seemed louder than it was in the bedroom. If he shut all the windows, he'd be able to hear if his name was called again, but he mistrusted his ability to maneuver that well without stumbling over the furniture. And as long as he was this far, he might as well go out into the hallway.

He did so, and listened intently. The rain drummed against the staircase window to his left. Beneath that drumming, Oscar thought he detected something more—a shuffling, a moving about, and a whispering. It seemed to come from the front of the house—from the front room.

"Elinor?" he called, not because he thought Elinor was in the house, but because it was Elinor who he wished were at his side. He crossed the hallway, and dragging his hand along the damp wallpaper, he made his way toward the front of the house. The whispers and the shuffling stopped, and all he heard was the drumming rain.

"Who is it?" he asked loudly. "Who's in there?"

He reached the front room door and then pressed his ear against one of the panels. A gust of wind blew rain against the door inset with stained glass at the front of the hall, but after a moment, the regular beat of the rain resumed.

Oscar knocked on the front room door. “Who’s in there?” he called.

He heard rustling inside, as if someone—or more than just one person—had suddenly moved about.

“Who is it?” he cried again. He pressed his right hand against the door, and ran it downward until he had grasped the knob. He turned the knob, and was about to push the door open, when once more his name was called.

Oscar!

“Mama?” he said. “Mama, is that you?”

He pushed open the door.

“Mama?” he said again.

Oscar!

Him? Is it him? cried the second voice, in an eager, piping lisp; the voice of a small boy.

He had heard his mother’s voice on his right. Oscar shuffled in that direction. Having no memory of the arrangement of furniture in the front room, he was wary of bumping into something. “Mama, if that’s you, answer me.” He heard the springs of the bed creak, as if someone had sat down on the edge of it. More creaks, and in different configurations, suggested that someone else had just lain down on the bed.

Him? Is it him? the small voice repeated.

Yes, came the reply from the bed.

Oscar heard a slight scuffle against the floor, and then immediately felt small arms—the arms of a child—grasping him around his thighs. The child’s arms were wet, and their dampness penetrated the cloth of Oscar’s pajamas. Oscar struggled to maintain his balance, but fell forward. Fortunately he was near the bed, and that stopped him. He reached out into that blackness, and his hand was suddenly gripped tight. The hand that grasped his was wet and slick. Its nails dug into his palm.

At the same time, the child dragged at his legs, attempting to pull him down to the floor.

This one. This one, hissed the child.

Oscar struggled. He freed his hand, then turned around, sitting on the edge of the bed. He flailed his arms before him, and grabbed the child. The boy tore viciously at Oscar with his long nails.

“Who is this?” Oscar cried, holding the child tight, and drawing him close. The boy was wet all over, and he stank. The foul air of the Perdido was breathed into Oscar’s face.

John Robert, said the voice behind Oscar. Oscar felt the mattresses of the bed shifting beneath him. Whoever was behind him was sitting up. Two arms grasped him tightly from behind.

"John Robert DeBordenave," whispered Oscar, suddenly letting the child go. The name came to him without his searching for it, without his even remembering that such a child had ever existed, without his being able to recall what had ever become of him. Oscar heard the boy scramble away. Some small piece of furniture was knocked over, and Oscar heard the splinter of wood.

John Robert was dead. He had drowned in the Perdido. Oscar now remembered that. But if John Robert was dead, and were yet here in this room, then Oscar's mother Mary-Love, who was also dead, might be here as well. Oscar grasped the arms that held him tight. He turned his head over his shoulder. "Mama?" he asked. "Mama, is that you? Don't hold me so tight, you're squeezing me."

But if it was Mary-Love, then Mary-Love wouldn't let go. She squeezed Oscar tighter, until it seemed that he could not breathe at all. And meanwhile John Robert was further smashing up the piece of furniture he had overturned.

The rain beat against the front room windows, and it seemed to Oscar as if he were beneath the waters of the river, so deep and pervasive was the smell of the Perdido in the room. He scarcely noticed at first when John Robert began to beat him about the legs with a stick. But that insensitivity became pain as John Robert turned the stick around and a protruding nail—bent and rusted, but still sharp—was jabbed repeatedly into his legs, ripping his flesh as easily as it ripped the cloth of his pajamas.

"Mama," Oscar pleaded, "stop him. Stop him. I cain't. I'm blind. Mama..."

Oscar may have been wrong. It may not have been Mary-Love. But whoever it was, she did not stop John Robert, but instead she pushed Oscar forward onto the floor. And John Robert stood over him, and beat him about the breast and shoulders with the stick, digging the single nail again and again into Oscar's flesh with a savage monotony.

Oscar lay trembling, and then he lay still. Then he heard his mother's voice, slow and melancholy. *Not for you, Oscar. But for Elinor.*

"Mama?" said Oscar weakly. "Mama, I lost my eyes..."

The relentlessly beating stick moved upward toward Oscar's face.

The eyes, Mary-Love's voice echoed. *John Robert, the eyes.*

"Mama—" Oscar said. It was his last word. John Robert DeBordenave swung the table leg one more time, and that single nail exploded through the cataract of Oscar's eye, burst the eyeball, tore apart the optic nerve, and plunged three inches deep into his brain.

Chapter 81

Footsteps

It was Elinor who discovered Oscar's corpse, counted the punctures in his body, extracted the nail that was lodged in his brain, and persuaded Leo Benquith, in senile retirement, to sign a death certificate without even looking at his old friend. It was Elinor who prepared the body for burial, and she and Zaddie who lifted Oscar's stiffened form into his coffin. The town protested loudly, but Elinor said, "Oscar made me promise to do it all myself." The other members of the family did not protest; Elinor had her reasons, doubtlessly, and it was probably best not to enquire into them too closely.

All the furniture in that bedroom and sitting room—the furniture with which Oscar and Elinor had started out their marriage—Elinor gave to Escue Wells and Luvadia Sapp out at Gavin Pond Farm. All Oscar's clothing and the very linen they had used in those rooms was distributed among the poor through the Methodist Church in Baptist Bottom. "These rooms smell of Oscar," Elinor said to Zaddie. "I won't have these rooms smelling of him when I go to sleep at night. I won't be reminded of him like that. I think of him enough as it is."

A rumor got around that Oscar's death had not been natural after all. Murder, however, seemed unlikely. Nobody was at the house that night but Zaddie, and Zaddie's care for Oscar in his blindness was widely known and universally commended. Her life-long loyalty to the family placed her above suspicion. Since Leo Benquith would not speak, even to provide details that would have corroborated heart failure as the cause of death—as the death certificate read—the town eventually decided that Oscar, depressed because of the failure of the operation on his cataracts, had committed suicide. His last note to Elinor, it was said, was now in a safety-deposit box in Mobile. Suicide was a sufficient explanation for all the mystery surrounding the very private disposition of Oscar Caskey's corpse.

Oscar had withdrawn so from the family the last years of his life that his death made a difference only to Elinor, and Zaddie, and Sammy Sapp, really. Only they had had anything to do with him for the past two years. Poor Sammy Sapp wondered if he'd have to give up his uniform and move

back out to the farm. Like so many Sapps before him, he really did prefer the town existence. Elinor kept Sammy on; she said it befitted her station to have a chauffeur.

. . .

Perdido watched Elinor closely. The behavior of a widow was always a matter of interest and comment, and Elinor Caskey was, in herself, no ordinary woman. Perdido noticed a number of things: the first was that she did not weep at the funeral. And after that ceremony, she did not wear black, nor did she in any other manner appear to change the routine of her former existence. She went on living just as she had lived when her husband was alive. For the nearly fifty years of their marriage, she had appeared devoted to him, and he to her. Perdido uncharitably concluded that the marriage, in the last years particularly, had been only a sham. Elinor and Oscar had remained together out of convenience, because a rupture would have proved financially inconvenient to the entire family. Elinor and Oscar, Perdido was certain, had grown cold to one another as they got older. Elinor had become exasperated with her husband's blindness, Oscar had shrunk beneath Elinor's lack of sympathy.

In company, even within the family, Elinor never talked of Oscar. She never made a mistake, as many people do who have lost a loved one, and spoke of him as if he were still alive. Every morning, after the beds had been made, Sammy drove Elinor and Zaddie over to the cemetery and Zaddie got out of the car and placed fresh flowers on Oscar's grave. There was something so cold and perfunctory in this ritual—Elinor never got out of the car; never even rolled down the window, for that matter—that Perdido concluded that it was as false as Elinor's grief. In the new part of town, among the people who had lived in Perdido for only twenty or thirty years, rumor had it that old man Caskey hadn't died a natural death, and that Elinor and her maid had done him in for the money that was to come to both of them.

It was indicative of the changes in the Caskey family that this rumor was able to get started at all; and it was indicative of the changes in the family's relationship to the town that the Caskeys never even got wind of it. Perdido had grown, and Perdido had got rich. The people who had bought up land after the discovery of oil were now rolling in money. And there were the owners of the new shops and other businesses who catered to and serviced this new wealth. The money that spewed up out of the earth, out of

hundreds and hundreds of wells, settled over Perdido, and was spouted up again and again, until it seemed that the whole town might drown in it.

The Caskey mill continued, and expanded even further, under Miriam's direction, but it wasn't the small local operation that it had been. Workers now came from all over; they drove down every morning from Brewton, over from Jay, and up from Bay Minette. Three full shifts kept the mills going twenty-four hours a day; Miriam allowed the plants to shut down only on Sundays and national holidays. Of course a great number of people from Perdido still worked at the mill, or made their livings indirectly from it, but it no longer seemed essential to the town's well-being. Perdido now was always full of strangers, people who had no real interest in the town.

The Caskeys, of course, were very rich—far richer than anyone in Perdido suspected, in fact, for they didn't make an ostentatious show of their wealth. The newest house in the Caskey compound was Elinor's, and that had been built fifty years before. All the new wealth in Perdido had put up huge houses on the outskirts of town, with triple-car garages, swimming pools, and tennis courts serving as proof of substantial means. One of the doctors in town even bought himself an airplane, and built a landing strip right beside his house on which to show it off. New wealth constructed beach houses down at Destin, and made yearly trips to Disneyland and Acapulco. New wealth ate out in Pensacola nearly every night, and sent its boys off to military schools in North Carolina and Virginia. Its girls stayed at home and got three years of braces. The Caskeys, however, lived on in their dowdy houses, with their old furniture, and did what they had always done. It was commonly recognized that the Caskeys had allowed Perdido to pass them by.

Queenie's death had broken up the Monday afternoon bridge club, and Elinor did not apparently care to play with the younger women who had taken it over. After Oscar's death Elinor allowed their membership in the Lake Pinchona Country Club to lapse, but an even more drastic change was the fact that the Caskeys no longer went to church. First Elinor stopped going, and then Billy stayed home—to keep her company, he said. Miriam bluntly announced, "Well, Mama, if you can stay away, then I can too. One less time to dress up every week is fine with me. And there is plenty of work I can do." Malcolm would never have thought of doing anything that Miriam didn't do herself, so all the Perdido Caskeys remained away. Elinor

still punctually paid a yearly pledge to the church, and, discreetly, she was never to be seen on her front porch or riding around the town during the hours of Sunday school or morning services. The Caskeys' apparent apostasy was much discussed around town, and Perdido postulated decades of arguments between Elinor and Oscar on the subject of church attendance.

With ever greater frequency, Miriam and Malcolm were out of town on business. In the past decade Miriam had found a series of managers who pleased her and to whom she had turned over most of the day-to-day business of the mill. She retained for herself all the more complex, personal, and exciting business of investments and large-scale bargaining. There had been a time when she had relied a great deal on Billy Bronze. When Miriam encountered executives who didn't fancy dealing with a woman, Billy had been there to back her up. But now Miriam herself was well known, and even when she wasn't, she had developed enough finesse to handle just about any situation. Also, on those occasions when she ran into an executive who just *wouldn't* take her seriously because she was a woman, Miriam merely shrugged and walked out in the midst of the conversation, leaving the man to discover later what a foolish mistake he had made. She was rich enough to do that now. Miriam preferred to work alone, and Billy preferred to remain with Elinor. Billy gave up his downtown office, and converted two of the bedrooms upstairs to his own use.

When he was young, Billy Bronze had dreamed of many types of existence, but never this. He would never have chosen Perdido as a place to live. He was certain he didn't like small towns; he always preferred places like Houston and New Orleans. He didn't like the smell of the river. He had no friends in Perdido.

Yet here he was, living in an old house with an aging mother-in-law, rising at seven, sitting down to a formal breakfast in the dining room, and then retiring to his air-conditioned office on the second floor, where he looked over the morning mail and talked on the telephone to Miriam at the mill, to brokers in New York, and to oilmen in Texas. He had a secretary come in at noon to type up all his letters, and while she worked Billy had lunch with Elinor and Miriam and Malcolm. After lunch he and Elinor sat out on the screened-in porch and talked until the secretary was finished. Then Billy went back and shut himself in his office again. He most often took supper alone with Elinor in quiet contented splendor. In the evening he watched television, or listened to ball games on Oscar's radio—the only

item of Oscar's private possessions that remained in the house. Billy went to bed early, not because the day had wearied him, but rather because there seemed nothing else to do.

He was quite rich now, richer than he had ever imagined possible; he had inherited all of Frances's money, all his father's, and he had much that he had made himself—but he did nothing at all with it. He never went anywhere, he never bought anything. It was Elinor who said, "Billy, it's about time you had a new suit." And then Sammy Sapp would drive him and Elinor down to Mobile and Elinor would choose three or four new suits for him and pay for them herself. Billy had assumed, when he was young, that he would have a family: a wife and three children—two boys and a girl. He *had* married, of course, but his wife was dead, and he lived on with his widowed mother-in-law. He had had a daughter, but that daughter had been taken away from him. Lilah no longer even called him "Daddy," and he saw her not more than once a year, and only then when it pleased her to come home for Christmas.

All his little dreams as a young man—all those things he would get, and have and be—were merely means to the end, and the end was personal happiness. Things hadn't turned out the way he imagined they would, not at all, but he was, nonetheless, quite happy. He worried that he was fooling himself, that he was closing his eyes and declaring loudly that the bars that constrained him were not there at all. Perhaps they were there: were this house, and Elinor, and the pecan orchard across the way, and the levee and the river flowing behind the levee, Miriam making demands on him over the telephone on one side, and the dark pine forest on the other. If they were, though, he didn't feel them. He honestly didn't *feel* constrained; or if he did, then it was constraint itself that gave him pleasure.

Now it seemed likely that he would attend Elinor on her death-bed, for he was only forty-seven, and Elinor at this time was probably seventy-four or seventy-five. Sometimes *that* was his thought, and no other, when he raised his eyes from the foot of the dining room table and stared down the expanse of white linen to where his mother-in-law sat, erect and regal, with the candlelight gleaming on the ropes of black pearls about her neck.

. . .

Some years before, Oscar had had the house air conditioned throughout, and the two large units, located just under the window of Zaddie's room, hummed loudly from April through October. Oscar had liked the house

chilled, for he was very warm-blooded, and Elinor and Billy and Zaddie had grown so used to it that they did not raise the thermostat after Oscar's death. As a result, Billy always slept under covers, and in the summer he always fell asleep with the noise of forced cold air in his ears. That and the hum of the cooling units themselves outside covered up all the small night noises in that large old house—or almost all. As he lay awake so many nights, Billy noticed that his hearing became acuter. He could make out noises *beneath* the air conditioning: the creaks, and the false footpads, the snaps in the furniture, and the slight ringing in cupboards filled with glassware.

Yet the noises on some nights were more than that, more than the occasional creak, snap, and ringing. Sometimes Billy seemed to hear one of the outside doors swinging damply open, as if Zaddie had peered out the back door perhaps to see if the moon had yet risen, and then allowed the door to swing softly shut again. On other nights he seemed to hear footsteps on the stairs. He knew that one stair in particular creaked, on the right-hand side going up, and sometimes he heard that stair. Perhaps Zaddie was going up to the staircase window to peer out at the stars. Billy never got up to look. Once he was in bed, he stayed there. Even when he had nightmares, and lay sweating and trembling in bed, his feet remained unswervingly pointed at the bouquet of violets painted on the foot board and his hands lay palm upward atop the neatly folded covers. He often awoke chilled with the sweat of the nightmare clammy upon his brow.

On rainy nights, the water falling against the windows of the house further masked whatever noises played in the house. Yet, as if whatever caused those sounds was emboldened by that extra masking noise, the footsteps and the creaks and the snaps became less surreptitious. Billy would gaze toward the door that opened onto the linen corridor leading to the front room. Or he would stare at the lightly curtained windows that looked onto the screened porch. He would strain to hear, and particularly on these rainy nights, he thought he detected voices in the house—whispers, low laughter, and tiny smothered squeals.

Billy grew used to these noises, just as he had grown used to his strictured life. He did not mention them to Elinor or Zaddie. For all he knew, one of them might be sneaking friends into the house; or they might be staying up late together and talking of Oscar and all the others they had

seen die. Whoever moved so softly about the house at night wished to remain unknown to Billy. And Billy delicately refused to pry.

One morning just after dawn, one of Billy's worst nightmares returned, and he was so frightened that he woke up rather than allowing it to continue. He immediately forgot its substance, though he knew that whatever it was, he had dreamed it before. He lay still in the bed, feeling the salty sweat drip from his forehead into his eyes. He turned his head and examined the door to the linen closet. He did this every morning, he knew not why, but he was always relieved to find that it had not been opened—though who should open it, or why he thought it might swing open of its own accord, he had no idea. Then he looked in the other direction, and saw the early morning sunlight filtering through the sheer curtains. He could make out the green furniture of the porch dimly, and that too was a comfort. He got out of bed, went into the bathroom, and quietly bathed and shaved; it was fully an hour before his usual time, and he did not wish to disturb Elinor across the hall. He dressed, and then stepped out into the hallway, intending to go downstairs and beg an early cup of coffee from Zaddie. He wondered if he'd have to wake her up.

But Zaddie was not only up, she was kneeling on the staircase landing beneath the great window, wiping up a large puddle of water.

Billy quietly went down the stairs.

"Morning, Zaddie. What happened?" Billy asked.

"I spilled a glass of water," returned Zaddie uneasily.

Billy said nothing, though he didn't believe her. Zaddie didn't like to lie, and lying showed in her face. But even if Zaddie's face had borne the serenity of lying Sapphira's, Billy would have known that it was not a glass of water that spilled there. As he passed Zaddie on his way downstairs, he was assailed with the smell of muddy Perdido water.

He still said nothing, but he noticed that the stairs were *all* damp. Zaddie, then, had just finished mopping up Perdido water from *all* the stairs.

. . .

In fact, Billy said nothing about the incident for so long a time that his very silence on the matter seemed to take on substance for him in that sluggish household. Elinor had never said a word about hearing noises or voices at night. Neither had Zaddie. But both Elinor and Zaddie looked at Billy every morning as if they wondered whether *this* morning, he would say anything.

And when he never did, the women seemed to look at him in a way that suggested that they approved of his decision to say nothing. This, at least, was Billy's interpretation of what was going on in their minds and was very likely—he thought—only more of his imagination.

Yet as if reassured by his silence, Billy was certain that the noises grew louder, less constrained. Now, beneath the air conditioner, beneath the rain, Billy very definitely made out footsteps; steps that came up the stairs and sometimes went directly into Elinor's room, and sometimes paused at his own door first. Billy would lie in bed, unmoving, but thinking bravely, *Come in. Come in.* But always the steps turned away. Occasionally there was a second set of steps, too, but these were quite different, halting and clumsy, and they never paused at his door. Then would come the voices. He could make out Elinor's voice now—that was easy. The second voice was more difficult to identify. It wasn't Zaddie, of that he was certain. Yet it was familiar. It sounded, in fact, like Frances's voice. But since Frances was dead, it must be someone whose voice made him think of his drowned wife. But he could think of no one, and that bothered him. The third voice wasn't like any that he had ever heard before, sometimes it was a hoarse bleat, and sometimes a kind of singing—singing that was neither happy, sad, reverent, patriotic, or any of the other things he had ever associated with song.

Billy never investigated these phenomena, never attempted to discover their source or identity. They were Elinor's business, he intuited, and he would do nothing that abridged her privacy. Even when he woke earlier than usual, he remained in bed. He would not go out of his room, for he did not want again to surprise Zaddie in the act of mopping up Perdido water from the stairs. He laid no traps, he made no insinuating remarks, he put aside even the appearance of curiosity or puzzlement. This, however, did not mean that his curiosity and puzzlement did not increase, almost daily.

One day in October the air conditioning was turned off, and when Billy went to bed that night he wondered whether the noises would continue as before. They did not, that first night, and he was disappointed. He hardly slept at all, and next morning both Elinor and Zaddie commented on how poorly he looked. "It's because the air conditioner got turned off," he said blandly. "I'm used to all that noise, I guess."

But the following night Billy was pleased to hear the footsteps again, and the two voices: Elinor's and the one that sounded so much like Frances's that he could not imagine its belonging to anyone else. About a

week later, the second visitor came as well, and Billy heard quite vividly the clumsy steps upon the stairs, a hoarse muffled bleat in the hallway, and much later in the night, the high-pitched singing. Billy listened and tried to imagine who could be singing thus, a wandering interminable hypnotic song, in accents, and pitches, and rhythms that were wholly unfamiliar.

The autumn passed, winter came on, and Elinor put down carpeting on the stairs. Most mornings it was still damp when Billy came down to breakfast. Elinor always asked him, "How did you sleep last night?"

"Fine," Billy always replied. "I dreamed of Frances. I dreamed Frances came to see us."

One rainy night in February of 1969, Billy lay long awake. Both sets of footsteps had come not long after he had got into bed, and he was upset that the loud patter of the rain kept him from hearing nothing more than an occasional laugh or croaking bleat. Yet that night, just as Billy was finally drifting off to sleep, the singing came again, stronger than ever before; singing that was at once caught in the rhythm of the falling rain, yet running counter to it in such a way that he could catch every quaver of its wandering melody. He listened in delight, and then in wonder when a second voice was united with the first, in precise cadence and then in counterpoint; and his wonder turned to rapture when a third voice joined them. The third voice was Elinor's, and she was singing as neither Billy nor anyone else in Perdido had ever heard her sing. The three voices—*female but not human,* Billy thought—went on for more than an hour, lasting as long as the rain. But as the rain slackened, so did the three voices. When the water was no more than an irregular dripping from the eaves, the singing stopped altogether. Billy had long ago lost the habit of prayer, but now he prayed for the clouds to return, and to open up above the house in hope that the voices might again unite in song. The clouds had flown beyond Perdido, however, and the house was silent except for an occasional drip from the roof. But Billy did not sleep; straining against sleep, he waited for the footsteps to leave Elinor's room. At last, when he thought that dawn must soon be upon them, he was rewarded. The door of Elinor's sitting room softly opened, and he heard the footsteps move out into the hallway. Instead of going directly to the stairs, however, they paused before the door of his room.

This is something else new, Billy thought excitedly.

He had trained his eyes as well as his ears, and he saw quite well in the darkened rom. He saw the glass knob of the door turning softly, and it

shone a little fractured light into his eyes.

The door was pushed quietly open.

Billy closed his eyes. Whoever it was expected him to be asleep, and he would no more have appeared to be awake than he would have said to Elinor, “Who do you entertain every night in your room?”

Billy’s eyes were closed, but he could not refrain from smiling.

See, whispered the voice that was Frances’s—but not Frances’s, because Frances was dead, drowned in the black waters of the Perdido. *See, Nerita? That’s your daddy.*

Chapter 82

Mrs. Woskoboinikow

In the spring of 1969, Lilah Bronze graduated from Barnard with high honors. If she hadn't fought relentlessly with her tutor during her senior year she would probably have graduated Summa rather than only Magna cum laude. The Caskeys wondered whether Lilah would return to Perdido, but no one asked her plans. They would find out quickly enough, and Lilah was just the sort to say, "I have no idea," just for the perversity of it. She returned home once that summer, in August, and then barely long enough to reassure her family that she had taken no part in the campus riots of the previous spring.

"And I'm only here for a week," she said at the Sunday dinner table to which all the Caskeys had gathered to welcome her back. "So nobody run off accepting invitations for me or anything like that."

Elinor and Billy, Miriam and Malcolm all glanced at one another, but for several moments no one said anything. Grace and Lucille said nothing; they did not approve of the manner in which Lilah had always been allowed to go her own way, unchecked. Tommy Lee Burgess simply looked embarrassed. Then, at last, with vast diffidence, Malcolm said, "Ah, Lilah..."

"Yes?" Lilah returned quickly and almost savagely.

Malcolm saw that it was his responsibility to ask the great question, and he cast about in his mind for a framework for it that wouldn't anger Lilah. He at last found a supremely delicate interrogatory: "If you decide to change your telephone number, you might write down the new one and send it to me—just in case there's an emergency or anything."

Lilah nodded, and everyone felt relieved. Lilah was evidently appeased by Malcolm's subtlety.

"In fact," Lilah said, mollified, "I've *already* changed my number. I'll give it to you before I leave."

Billy cleared his throat, and said, "Lilah, did you move out of your old apartment or did you just have the number changed?"

"Why the hell would I change my number unless I moved?" Lilah demanded.

Her father shrugged as if to indicate that nothing Lilah did could astonish him.

"I've moved about two blocks away," Lilah continued reluctantly. It seemed as if her family had ferreted out her most private and long-guarded secret.

"A bigger place?" asked Miriam.

"Yes..." said Lilah thoughtfully. "Yes, it is bigger."

"Higher up?" asked Elinor. "Or lower down?" Previously Lilah had lived on the twenty-first floor.

Lilah didn't answer at once. She glanced around the table, clucked her tongue, sighed, dropped her napkin into her lap, and said, "Well, I guess I may as well go on and tell you..."

"Tell us what?" asked Tommy Lee quickly.

"...because you will worm it out of me before I get out of here, anyway. And if I say it now, maybe you will let me have some peace."

"What is it, honey?" asked Malcolm.

"Two things," said Lilah. "First one is, I'm staying in New York. I'm not coming back here."

"We figured that," said Grace dryly, "when you said you had moved two blocks away."

"And the reason I'm staying is that I'm going to law school in the fall. Columbia again."

The Caskeys all thought about this for a few moments, and then offered their congratulations. It was thought a wise decision; there were so many others she might have made that wouldn't have been wise at all.

"Any particular kind of law?" asked Billy.

"I'm not sure," replied Lilah. "Tax law, probably."

"Good," said Miriam. "Then you'll be able to help us. Billy and I go through I don't know what all every year with those people we hire up in Atlanta."

"Maybe," said Lilah. "Maybe I'll help—and maybe not. Maybe I won't go into tax law at all."

Some discussion followed now on the business of taxes and lawyers in general, a discussion in which Lilah took no part. When finally there was a pause, Lilah spoke up with exasperation. "Well, doesn't anybody want to hear the other part of my news?"

“I thought that was it,” said Lucille. “You’re staying in New York, and you’re going to tax law school.”

“That was just one thing,” said Lilah peevishly. “I was counting those two as one.”

“What else then?” asked Tommy Lee.

Lilah looked around the table to make sure that she had everyone’s attention. “Now, I don’t want you all to jump all over me,” she warned.

No one said anything, and that counted as a promise not to disapprove no matter what she was about to tell them.

“I got married last week,” said Lilah. “On Thursday.”

The Caskeys said nothing, partly out of shock, and partly in fulfilment of their promise not to express displeasure. She could hardly have said anything more stunning.

Grace, at last, with an exaggerated gesture of peering around the room, said, “Is he here? Did you bring him?”

“I did not,” said Lilah definitely.

“You could have,” said Miriam. “There’s plenty of room.”

“He wouldn’t come,” said Lilah. “I *did* ask him.”

“Why not?” asked Billy. “Why wouldn’t he come?”

“He hates Alabama,” replied Lilah. “He came down here in ’64 and ’65 for all the civil rights business, and he got hosed down and beaten up and thrown into the Selma jail. He says he will never set foot in Alabama again.”

“This man have a name?” asked Lucille.

“His name is Michael.”

“Does he have a last name?” asked Miriam.

“Woskoboinikow.” The whole table looked blank. Lilah repeated the name very slowly. *“Wosko*—rhymes with *Roscoe. Boin*—like *boing-boing. Ikow*—like *he coughs.* Got it? Woskoboinikow. Real simple. It’s Polish. He’s not. Or his grandfather was, I guess. He’s from Cleveland. So now I’m Lilah Woskoboinikow. I’ve already had my checks printed up. If you want to see them, I’ve got them in my bag.”

“And what does he do?” asked Billy. “Now that he’s out of jail?”

“He’s a plasma physicist. A scientist,” she explained when everyone regarded her blankly.

The Caskeys shook their heads. It was just like Lilah to have got married without warning to a man with a name that no one had ever heard

of or could rightly pronounce or remember how to spell, whose job involved something they had never heard of, and who refused absolutely ever to come to Alabama.

"Are we gone be allowed to meet him?" Miriam asked.

"If you come to New York," said Lilah.

"Let me ask you something," said Miriam.

"What?"

"Does Michael know how much money you have?"

"I don't have any money of my own," Lilah reminded her.

"Does Michael know how much money *we* have then?" Miriam persisted.

"I've told him," Lilah replied. "But I don't think he really realizes it. Michael doesn't know anything about money. I've been handling all his finances for the past year. I don't think he cares."

The Caskeys sighed, and once the immediate shock was over, it occurred to each of them that they should have known all along that it would happen precisely this way.

. . .

Tommy Lee Burgess, in his new position as Miriam's assistant in matters relating to the Caskey oil properties, had grown in stature not only in his own eyes, but in those of his family and the community at large. He was, in fact, thought quite a catch. He wasn't handsome, and he certainly was overweight, but he was good-natured and kind—and very rich. Tommy Lee, however, showed no interest whatsoever in any one of the thirty or forty thousand marriageable young women in Baldwin County, Alabama, and Escambia County, Florida. Tommy Lee was content to stay at home with Grace and Lucille. His recreation was still hunting and fishing, and occasionally innocently carousing with the men who worked the oil rigs in the swamp south of the farm. The fact was—and all the Caskeys knew it—that Tommy Lee was hopelessly in love with Lilah Bronze; had loved her since the day he had moved in with his grandmother next door to Lilah. He had been mightily disappointed that Lilah did not go to school at Auburn, and now he was more severely distressed to discover that she had up and married a man whose name nobody could even pronounce. He said nothing at the dinner table when Lilah made her startling announcement, but on the drive back to the farm through the dark deserted countryside, he leaned forward from the back seat and, resting his chin on the seat between Grace

and Lucille, remarked ruefully, “I could have told everybody. I could have told everybody it was gone happen just this way.”

“How would you have known?” asked Lucille. “Nobody could predict that.”

“I could have, if I hadn’t been foolish. But I wanted to believe that someday Lilah would come back here.”

“You’re disappointed, aren’t you, Tommy Lee?” sighed Grace.

“I sure am,” Tommy Lee admitted in the dark.

“You shouldn’t be. Look at the way Lilah treats people. I never thought I’d be able to say this about anybody, but Lilah Whatever-her-name-is-now is harder to get along with than Miriam *ever* was. You even wanted to marry her, I guess.”

“I would have. I would have married her in a minute.”

“And have been miserable from that very minute into all eternity,” said Lucille. “She would have led you around by the nose.”

“I know it,” said Tommy Lee wistfully.

“You know what I think?” said Grace.

“What?”

“I think you ought to go and speak to Lilah and tell her how you feel.”

“What good would that do?” said Tommy Lee. “I had my chance. I didn’t say anything. Now it’s too late.”

“Then this is the time to say it,” argued Grace. “When it’s too late for her to say yes. And you’ll get it off your chest. I know you, Tommy Lee. I know you’ll carry this around like a two-ton safe on your back unless you go up to Lilah and tell her what you feel.”

“Better do it,” agreed Tommy Lee’s mother.

“Turn the car around,” said Tommy Lee, throwing himself mightily against the back seat. “Drive back right now and I’ll do it.”

But Grace continued on through Babylon toward the farm. “Go tomorrow,” she advised. “Do it in the daylight.”

So Tommy Lee drove back to Perdido the following morning and arrived before Lilah was even up. Melva had delivered Lilah’s breakfast on a tray, and Lilah was sitting up in bed. Tommy Lee knocked on the door jamb, and Lilah said, as she buttered her toast, “Miriam’s already gone down to the mill, Tommy Lee. I don’t know where the hell Malcolm’s gone off to.”

“I came to see you,” said Tommy Lee.

“Then come on in and sit on the edge of the bed,” said Lilah. She looked up and smiled at him. Lilah was a handsome girl, the handsomest girl Tommy Lee had ever known, and once Tommy Lee had gone out with the Auburn homecoming queen. Lilah’s smile was radiant, and it was also the kindest greeting she had ever given him.

“What are you doing here?” Tommy Lee began awkwardly.

“I am eating my breakfast. You know, you can’t get grits in New York City for love nor money.”

“No, I mean, what are you doing in Perdido? If you just got married last week, why aren’t you on your honeymoon?”

“Michael couldn’t get off right away. We’re going down to the Caribbean in the winter sometime. It doesn’t matter anyway. I hate all that business.”

“What business?” asked Tommy Lee.

“Wedding business,” returned Lilah. “That’s why I didn’t tell anybody. I didn’t want anybody to do anything. We went down to city hall. It was very impersonal,” she added with something very like pride.

Tommy Lee shifted his weight on the bed, nearly upsetting Lilah’s tray.

“You are big as a house, Tommy Lee,” Lilah remarked. “If you don’t be still, I’m going to make you move over to a chair.”

“I’ve missed you all that time you’ve been in New York,” said Tommy Lee.

“And I’ve missed you, too,” said Lilah, blowing on her coffee to cool it.

“Have you?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t say so if I hadn’t. I didn’t miss Grace and Lucille, for instance. I did miss you, though.”

Tommy Lee was silent for a few moments, not knowing how to go on. Melva came up again to see if everything was all right with the breakfast, and Lilah asked her to bring a tray for Tommy Lee.

“I just ate out at the farm,” Tommy Lee protested.

“You haven’t stopped at just one breakfast in ten years,” said Lilah. “Have another one, and keep me company.”

“So you’re going to be a lawyer,” said Tommy Lee, putting off the inevitable.

“I intend to make a *fortune,”* said Lilah vehemently.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'Why?' Everybody wants to make a lot of money."

"You *have* a lot of money, Lilah."

"I don't have one thing that's mine," said Lilah.

"If you wanted it, all you'd have to do is ask somebody for it. Just ask the first person in the family you ran up against and they'd write you a check for a million dollars. I know they would."

"I know they would, too," said Lilah quietly. "And you know me, Tommy Lee. You'd know I'd never ask."

Tommy Lee shrugged. "I guess," he said. Melva brought another breakfast on a tray and Tommy Lee moved to a wide chair. When Melva had left, Tommy Lee said, "Lilah, you want me to write you a big check? I would, you know, and I'd be pleased to do it. I'd keep it a secret, too. Nobody'd find out about it."

Lilah looked up and considered this. "Tommy Lee," she said, "would it make you happy if I let you pay for my law school?"

"It sure would!"

"Then I'll let you do it. Don't tell anybody, though."

"I won't," Tommy Lee promised. "But you know, they're gone figure it out."

"I know that," said Lilah. "Just don't *you* be the one to tell them."

For a few minutes they ate in silence, and then Tommy Lee said, "You know what?"

"What?"

"I have been hoping and hoping that you would come back to Perdido."

"I'm here."

"I mean for good," said Tommy Lee. "'Cause you know why?"

"Why?"

"'Cause when you got back, I was gone ask you to marry me."

"I know that," said Lilah.

"You did!"

"Of course I knew that, Tommy Lee. Every fool in town knew that. And I'm no fool."

"So you would have said no?"

Lilah considered this. “Maybe. Maybe not.” She considered a few moments more. “Probably I would have said no.”

“Why?” Tommy Lee asked with more curiosity than chagrin.

“Because that’s what everybody would have wanted. That’s what everybody would have expected. If I had married you, it would have been just like Miriam and Malcolm all over again. I didn’t want that. It’s not that I think you and I would have been unhappy, Tommy Lee, it’s just that I have no intention of hanging around this place doing what people expect me to do.”

“So you married that other man instead?”

“That’s right.”

“Is he as smart as you are, Lilah?”

“No. He’s not even as smart as you are, Tommy Lee, not when it comes to practical stuff. But Michael knows a lot about plasma physics, and I guess he’ll probably be important someday. And he does what I tell him to.”

“Guess he’d have to do that.”

They were silent for a few minutes, then Lilah sent Tommy Lee down to the kitchen for more coffee. When he came back up, she had put aside the tray and brushed the crumbs off the covers onto the floor. She sat up straight in the bed, brushing her hair.

“Don’t you be upset now,” she warned him.

“About what?” he asked, pouring coffee into the cup that she had placed on the bedside table.

“About me not marrying you.”

“I’m not upset,” said Tommy Lee. “I told you, I’m just disappointed. I’m real unhappy, but I’m not upset.”

“Now I’m going to tell you something,” said Lilah. “But I’m not going to tell you this unless you promise not to breathe a word of it to anybody—not Grace and Lucille, not Miriam, not Elinor, and not anybody.”

“I promise,” said Tommy Lee solemnly. “You want me to shut the door?”

“Nobody’s around,” said Lilah, dismissing that suggestion. “I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“I want you to be smart.”

“Lilah, I’m not sure—”

“I want you to learn everything there is to learn about those damned wells out there, and whatever else it is that makes this family so damned much money.”

“That I can do.”

“And then you come up to New York and you visit Michael and me and tell me all about it. Everything you can find out, you understand?”

“All right,” said Tommy Lee.

Lilah smiled. Indulgently, she condescended to explain: “I’m going to inherit from somebody somewhere along the line. Maybe from Daddy, maybe from Miriam, maybe from Elinor—who knows? So then I’m going to be rich. I’m also going to be a lawyer. Now what nobody else knows here is that at Columbia I majored in business.”

“Business!”

“Shhh! Yes. I told everybody I was majoring in English, but really and truly I majored in business.” Her brush was caught in a tangle of her long hair and she paused until she had drawn it free. “And what I intend to do is come back here sometime—*sometime,* Tommy Lee, so don’t be getting your hopes up—and you and I are going to show this place what we can do. We’re going to have more money than we know what to do with.”

“We have that already,” Tommy Lee pointed out.

“Then we’re going to have five times that. And you and I are going to do it together.”

“Are you thinking of a divorce?” he asked innocently. “Already?”

Lilah pointed her brush at him menacingly. “You are beginning to ask too many questions, Tommy Lee Burgess.”

Chapter 83

Champagne Toasts

Elinor announced that she wanted to give a little party for Lilah before she went back to New York to celebrate her marriage to the unknown Dr. Michael Woskoboinikow. Lilah reluctantly agreed, but only because Lilah had affection and respect for her grandmother. “I just don’t want too many people,” Lilah remarked. “I don’t want to get my arm shaken off and have to answer five hundred stupid questions about New York City. That’s what I don’t want.”

“It will just be family,” returned Elinor. “Since Michael isn’t here, we can’t very well ask anybody *but* family. There would be too many questions.”

“You mean just have everybody for dinner one night, that’s all you mean?” Lilah asked, relieved.

“Yes,” replied Elinor. “But just a bit more formal than usual. If you didn’t bring any, get Miriam to lend you some of her jewelry.”

So Elinor Caskey planned a small family dinner party for the night before Lilah was to fly back to New York. Billy and Malcolm and Tommy Lee bought new black dinner jackets, and Grace and Lucille went to Pensacola and bought new gowns. The dining room table was to be set with Mary-Love’s wedding china, Elinor’s best cut-glass crystal, and a set of James’s silver that had been taken out of the house before it burned.

No one knew why, but there was something melancholy about the preparations for this occasion. Perhaps it was the unwonted care that Elinor took with it, fussing over details in a fashion that wasn’t common with her. She sent Malcolm to New Orleans for a new tablecloth, and arranged for a florist to come up from Mobile to arrange the flowers on Friday morning. Zaddie and Luvadia and Melva were to serve, and each of these three black women got new gray uniforms just for that evening.

“Elinor,” Billy asked curiously, seeing all this business afoot, “are you planning on something special?”

“No,” Elinor replied after a few moments. “This is all just because we weren’t able to give Lilah a proper wedding...”

Friday night came, and all that remained of the family gathered at Elinor's. Malcolm arrived first and set up equipment needed to mix drinks, all such tasks long having fallen to his lot. Then Billy came downstairs to keep Malcolm company, and soon Lucille, Grace, and Tommy Lee arrived in their rarely driven Cadillac. Lucille, distressed by a new girdle, and Grace, a little unsure of her high heels, came up the front steps just as Elinor was coming down the stairs from the second floor. Miriam and Lilah came last, a strange pair making their way across the sandy yards in the refulgent Southern twilight; Miriam in purple velvet and diamonds and Lilah in green silk and emeralds.

They mounted the front steps and went onto the porch. Miriam knocked softly on the screen door. Zaddie appeared in her new starched uniform and opened the door.

"Evening, Miss Miriam. Evening, Miss Lilah."

"Evening, Zaddie," returned Miriam. "Everybody here?"

"Everybody here but you. And y'all sure are pretty tonight."

"Thank you," said Lilah simply, and actually blushed for the compliment.

Zaddie opened the doors of the front parlor, and Miriam marched directly in, saying, "Malcolm, have you fixed me a drink yet?"

Lilah lingered a little behind Zaddie, and then, as if gathering her courage—or maybe realizing that courage should not be an issue when only in the midst of her own family—Lilah entered the room, and sat next to Tommy Lee on the couch.

Zaddie and Luvadia then brought in two coolers with bottles of champagne. Malcolm opened the bottles and poured.

At Elinor's direction, Zaddie and Luvadia returned with Melva, and the three women stood in the doorway. They were given glasses of the champagne as well.

"The first toast," said Elinor, standing with her back to the front window, just in the place where Miriam remembered finding Mary-Love in her coffin, "is to Lilah, who is, at least for the time being, the last of the Caskeys. The next toasts will be to the Caskeys who have died. This party is as much in remembrance of them as it is in celebration of Lilah's marriage. Lilah, I hope you don't mind..."

Lilah shook her head and smiled. "No, ma'am," she said softly. "Not a bit."

The room was lighted softly, by candles and by sconces only. Was it that flattering illumination that made Lilah seem so suddenly altered, so softened?

Elinor smiled and continued. “I want to toast Oscar,” said Elinor quite simply. “I don’t know if any of you—except for Billy and Zaddie—have realized how much I miss him, and how empty this house seems to be without him. Whenever I hear his radio upstairs, I have to stop myself from hoping that it is Oscar, sitting in his chair and turning the dial from one ball game to the other. I think to myself, ‘That’s Billy, that’s not Oscar.’ Mary-Love used to say that the reason I came to this town was in order to snare her son. She always said that I was lying in wait for him—and for nobody else—upstairs in the Osceola in the flood of 1919.” Elinor smiled. “Mary-Love was right. And this toast is for Oscar.”

She raised her glass. They all raised their glasses, and drank off the champagne. Malcolm went quietly around, pouring more.

“This next is for Sister,” Elinor went on, “whom we all loved, and whom Miriam loved most of all. Poor Sister! She was never allowed to do anything on her own, never allowed to have anything or feel anything that was hers alone. She loved or hated always in contrariness. She fought all of her life, and I don’t think any of us ever really knew how hard those battles were for her. Sister, more than anybody I think, got to the root of this family, because of all of us, she was the most desperate. She fought harder and she clung harder, and when she changed—in the end—she changed more than any of us could ever have imagined possible. She became Mary-Love all over again, the one she hated most, the one that she loved the most. She was unhappy all her life, desperately unhappy, and if she came back now, if she walked in those doors and had a chance to do it all over again, I know she’d say, ‘I want everything just the same.’ So here’s to Sister, whom I miss very, very much.”

She raised her glass. They all raised their glasses, and again drank off the champagne.

Elinor went on: “One more. Just one more. For James and Queenie and Mary-Love. All of you remember them as parents, and aunts and uncles, but I don’t. I remember then differently. For one thing, I was the only one who was able to fight with Mary-Love on an even basis. And I was the only one who ever *won* a fight with her. I’m not going to say I miss her. Miriam, I wouldn’t lie to you even about that. Her coffin stood right here, right where

I'm standing. She died in the room directly above this one. I wasn't one bit sorry at the time, and I'm not one bit sorry now. I know how unhappy she made Oscar, I know what she did to Sister. And, Miriam—you're not going to appreciate my saying this—I know what she did to you." Miriam sat stiffly, staring at Elinor, but not venturing to object. "I wonder sometimes if I made a mistake in giving you up to Mary-Love. Mary-Love and I fought and we fought hard—harder than most of you can imagine, even now—and Miriam, you got caught in the middle."

Elinor paused, as if she expected Miriam to speak.

Miriam did so, but with obvious reluctance. "I've never really forgiven you, Mama, that's true. I know we get along all right these days, but you're so old—and I'm getting up there myself. I've got Mary-Love's ring now, the one you stole off her when she was dead. And I managed to get Lilah away from you, and that made me feel better. But I don't think I ever really forgave you, and I don't think that I ever will."

"I know that," said Elinor. "But the question is, if it could all be done over again right from the beginning, would you change anything?"

"No," replied Miriam, without hesitation. "Not a bit."

"Just like Sister," murmured Grace. "Poor Sister."

"And poor James," said Elinor, "and poor Queenie. Mary-Love walked all over James because James let her. Mary-Love couldn't stand Queenie because Queenie was a Strickland, but she didn't have Genevieve's class. I remember when Queenie came to town. Malcolm, you were a little boy—a mean little boy. And Lucille, you were a whiner. I never saw a child who cried more than you did. And all Queenie could think about was getting herself taken care of by James. But Queenie changed—and it was James's doing—because James took her seriously, and I don't think anybody had ever taken Queenie seriously before. Lucille, I hope you miss her."

"I do!" cried Lucille. "I sure do!"

"I do, too," said Malcolm.

"And me, too," said Tommy Lee.

"And I miss Daddy," sighed Grace.

"Y'all," cried Lucille, grasping Grace's hand and wringing it tightly, "all this is making me so sad. Let's don't talk about it anymore. Let's don't talk about all the people who have died. I thought this was a party for Lilah, and Lilah's getting married to what's-his-name."

“Woskoboinikow,” said Lilah. “His name is Woskoboinikow. And so is mine now. But you know what, Lucille?”

“What?” said Lucille.

“We all die,” said Lilah. “All of us. Every one of us in this room is going to die, sooner or later. Every one of us.”

“But we don’t have to talk about it!” cried Lucille.

“Y’all,” said Zaddie from the doorway. “It’s about time y’all sat down to the table. All my good food’s gone get cold if you don’t.”

The Caskeys drank the last of the champagne in their glasses, put the glasses aside, and filed into the dining room.

Lilah, as guest of honor, was seated at the foot of the table in Oscar’s old place, and Elinor had her accustomed place at the head.

In lieu of a blessing, Elinor said, “Here we are, the Caskeys who remain. We are fewer than we used to be, and we are—I am happy to say—much richer than we used to be. We have, in fact, everything that I always hoped that we would have. Yet things never turn out quite the way you think they will. But that doesn’t matter, not in the least. Sister and Miriam are right. No matter what you’ve gone through, no matter what you’ve done and suffered, no matter what horrible mistakes you’ve made, no matter what you’ve given up that you should have held on to, no matter what you’ve held on to that you should have let go, no matter what has happened to make you unhappy, you cannot wish for it to have happened any other way.” She looked around the table. Zaddie came in with the first of the dishes, a platter of pheasant that Tommy Lee had shot and hung the month before. Elinor smiled and fingered the ropes of black pearls about her neck. “Thank you, Zaddie,” she said. “Zaddie’s gone to a great deal of trouble for us tonight.”

“No trouble...” murmured Zaddie perfunctorily, but her denial was made with pride.

“Look at us, Zaddie,” said Elinor.

“Ma’am?”

“Look at us, Zaddie, because it’s the last time you’ll ever see us all together like this. Lilah is right: we all die. And there is somebody standing out there in the graveyard tonight, leaning on Mary-Love’s tombstone, and he’s flipping a coin to see which one of us is next.”

. . .

The dinner was substantial, and it seemed that there was no end to the dishes that Zaddie, Luvadia, and Melva brought out of the kitchen. Malcolm had not anticipated more than three bottles of wine being drunk, but as things turned out he had to open a fourth bottle, and then a fifth. Afterward, when the dishes had been cleared and two pots of coffee put out —one for Miriam, and one for everyone else—Malcolm and Billy lighted cigars. In the last stage of this evening, the conversation was mostly between Miriam and Lilah, and it turned again to the Caskeys' peculiar habit of stealing away one another's children.

Miriam didn't go into that subject directly, but her tack was nevertheless controversial. She said bluntly, "I hope you're gone be happy with that man, Lilah."

"I intend to be," said Lilah, equally as bluntly.

"The fact is," said Miriam, and this was her point, "we were all hoping a little that you and *Tommy Lee* would get married."

Lilah and Tommy Lee exchanged glances.

"Lilah wasn't in love with me," said Tommy Lee. "Too bad."

"That's a matter of opinion," remarked Grace, not entirely beneath her breath.

"I suppose it would have been more convenient for everybody if I had married Tommy Lee," said Lilah. "Convenient for everybody but me, I mean."

"You and Tommy Lee could have taken over around here when I am old and gray," said Miriam.

"We could have taken over when you were dead, Miriam," retorted Lilah. "I don't see you giving up too much of your power *until* then."

"Maybe not," agreed Miriam. The other Caskeys sat back farther in the chairs, leaving room for the two bejeweled women. "Maybe not," Miriam repeated, "but I've been good to Tommy Lee, haven't I? I've given him things to do."

"You've been real good to me," said Tommy Lee to Miriam. "She's taught me a lot," he said to the assemblage in general. "She's given me a lot of responsibility."

"There was another reason I would have liked for Lilah to marry Tommy Lee," Miriam went on, rushing in over the end of Tommy's grateful speech.

"What else?" asked Lucille curiously.

“Malcolm and I have been lonely next door all by ourselves. I was hoping that Lilah and Tommy Lee would have a baby. That’s all.” Miriam poured another cup of coffee. “Zaddie,” she said to the black woman who was passing through the room just then, “would you bring me a bigger cup, please? I’m gone be pouring out of this pot all night long if you don’t.”

“You’d want me to have a baby so you could steal it,” said Lilah. “Just like you stole me.”

“Yes,” Miriam admitted calmly. “Except I would have gotten this one real young. I was really hoping for it, Lilah. Malcolm and I really have been pretty lonesome since you went off.”

Billy said: “Now you know how Elinor and I felt when you took Lilah away from *us.”* It was not an accusatory remark, it was only an observation.

Miriam didn’t reply to this, but to Lilah she said: “You think you and this boy might think about having a baby?”

“He wants one,” said Lilah. “I don’t.”

“Why not?” asked Lucille.

“Because I see no point in going through months of discomfort and pain so that Miriam can get on a plane and come up to New York and take it away from me.”

“I don’t think it’s *that* much pain,” said Miriam. “Besides, I’d send Melva or somebody up there to take care of you, if that’s what you’re worried about. I don’t even care if it’s a boy or a girl, and neither does Malcolm. And you can pick out any name you want. You can call it Shadrach-Meshach-and-Abednego if you want to.”

“No,” said Lilah bluntly. “I won’t do it.”

“Miriam,” said Grace in indignant astonishment, “you are just like Mary-Love. You can’t pour a cup of coffee without its being a plot.”

Zaddie had brought the larger cup, and Miriam filled it with coffee.

“I’m not plotting,” she said. “I just thought it would be nice to have a baby. Malcolm and I got married too late. And everybody in this room has had the pleasure of raising a child except for Malcolm and me.”

“Then go out and find one,” suggested Lilah sharply. “Visit an orphanage. Put an ad in the paper.”

“I want a *Caskey* baby,” said Miriam. “It has to be a *Caskey* baby.”

Lilah said nothing.

Quite calmly, Miriam continued: “After all I’ve done for you, after all that I’ve given you, you wouldn’t say ‘thank you’ if you were tied to the

stake and I was holding a lighted match."

"Thank you, Miriam," Lilah said, "for everything you've done for me. But I still won't give you a little baby."

Chapter 84

The Nest

"I'm sorry," said Billy, when everyone had gone home and he and Elinor were ascending to their bedrooms, "that Miriam and Lilah had to have words like that."

"Miriam was just being Miriam," said Elinor, shaking her head with a smile, "and Lilah was being Lilah. I don't imagine there was any harm done. They walked home together, didn't they? And next week Miriam will fly up to New York and meet that man Lilah married."

"What do you think?" said Billy, pausing on the staircase landing. He had with him the last half bottle of champagne and a glass.

"About what?" asked Elinor, leaning for a moment against the frame of the great staircase window. They could hear Zaddie and Melva down in the dining room, clattering silverware and crystal as they cleared the room.

"About that baby business? Do you think that if Lilah had a baby, Miriam would try to steal it?"

"Yes," said Elinor. "I think she probably would."

"Do you think that's right?" Billy poured himself a glass of the champagne. "Should I have brought up another glass?" he asked parenthetically.

Elinor shook her head. "I don't know if it's right or not," she said. "Besides, what right do I have to say anything about it? I'm the one who started the whole business by giving up Miriam. The question should be: was *that* right?"

"Was it?"

Elinor started up the short flight of stairs from the landing to the second floor. "Why are you drinking that champagne?" she asked. "Didn't you have enough wine with dinner?"

"I hate to see it go to waste," said Billy, "and thinking of Frances made me sad." He followed Elinor up; she stood in the door of her sitting room.

"Frances?" she repeated.

"When you were toasting everyone who was dead," Billy said, "why did you leave out Frances?"

“Billy,” said Elinor, “drink your champagne and go to bed. It’s been a long evening.”

Billy turned away and went into his own room. He crossed over to the window that looked out at Miriam’s house. He could see Miriam and Lilah putting away the jewels they had worn. He stood there sipping his champagne, until all the lights were extinguished in Miriam’s house and his bottle was empty. Then he took off his clothes and got into bed. Without thought or reflection of any sort, he fell asleep.

He awoke sometime later; how much later he had no way of knowing. But it *seemed* late. His head ached, and he lay very still, pressing his fingers against his brow, hoping to suppress some of the throbbing. That did nothing. He went into the bathroom, swallowed two aspirin, and wiped his face with a damp cloth. That helped. He returned to his bedroom, and then, with the throbbing not so strong in his brain, he heard the voices. As usual, they came from Elinor’s room. The champagne had made him forget about them when he lay down upon the bed, and the champagne now made him abandon his studied timidity in the matter of Elinor’s visitors. Without any reflection on the consequences of his action, he went to the door to the hallway and opened it softly. The voices were louder now, but because Elinor’s sitting room door was closed, he still could not make out what was being said.

He recognized, as before, the voice that was his wife’s—except that Frances was dead, drowned in the black water of the Perdido.

Billy stepped out into the hallway. The carpet was damp beneath his feet. He could smell the water, and knew that it was from the river. It felt gritty on the soles of his feet, and he knew that to be Perdido mud. He walked across to the door of Elinor’s sitting room. He quietly turned the knob and inched the door open.

He wasn’t so startled by the sudden clarity of Elinor’s voice as he was by the light from her bedroom that fell suddenly aslant the leg of his pajamas. He stood still and listened.

“...too late,” Elinor said.

“No, it’s not,” came the other voice, Frances’s, except that Frances was drowned. “No, it’s not, Mama. But it’s going to be if you stay here. You’re old, you’re so old. And it hurts me when I see you getting older every day. I come to see you whenever I can, whenever I can make the change—but that’s not all the time. And Nerita *never* makes it—I don’t think she can.

What happens if I can't do it anymore? You should come stay with us, Mama. If you came back with us, you wouldn't get old, you might even get young again. Mama, Nerita and I would take good care of you!"

"I don't want to leave, darling."

"Why not? What's keeping you here? Daddy's dead. James is dead. Queenie is dead."

"Billy—" said Elinor.

"Billy stays here because of you. He doesn't want to leave you alone, that's all. If you went away, Billy would go off somewhere and have him a good time, I know he would, and it'd be good for him, too. Poor old Billy! You know, the other night I opened the door of my old room, and there was Billy—"

"You shouldn't have! What if you had waked him up?"

"Mama," laughed the someone who couldn't have been Frances, though she had Frances's voice and called Elinor Mama, "don't you think Billy knows something's going on?"

"He's never said anything."

"Neither has Zaddie. Don't you think Zaddie knows?"

"Zaddie *certainly* knows," agreed Elinor.

"And Billy does, too. Anyway, he didn't wake up. And I wanted to show Nerita what her daddy looked like."

"What did Nerita think?" Elinor asked curiously.

"She thought he looked old. And he does. Poor old Billy."

Billy pushed open the sitting room door all the way and then stepped into the light. Elinor sat in one of the plush new armchairs she had bought after Oscar's death, and on the edge of the bed sat Frances, his wife. Yet it wasn't Frances. It couldn't have been, for Frances had been born in 1922, and would have been nearly fifty now, had she not drowned in the Perdido. This Frances was no more than thirty-two or thirty-three, and she looked like the Frances that Billy last remembered.

"Frances?" said Billy.

Frances laughed, drawing her cotton robe across her breast. "Hey, Billy," she said shyly. "Why haven't you gotten married in all these years?"

"Billy," said Elinor, not sternly but sadly, "go back to bed."

Billy stepped further into the room. He stood behind Elinor's chair, and looked at his wife.

"Are you alive?" he asked.

“No,” said Elinor.

Frances shook her head. “No,” she said. “I’m not.”

“Who is Nerita?” Billy asked.

“Nerita is your other little girl,” said Frances. “Nerita didn’t come tonight.”

“But some nights she does come,” said Billy “And she sings?”

“You’ve heard her?” asked Elinor, looking up at Billy over her shoulder.

“Yes,” said Billy. “I’ve heard her. And when you opened my door the other night, I *was* awake, but I didn’t open my eyes.”

“Go back to bed,” said Elinor.

“You’re not sad about me, are you?” Frances asked curiously.

Billy shook his head. “I never was,” he admitted.

“Good,” said Frances. “Then go back to bed, Billy, and whenever you hear Nerita and me coming upstairs to visit Mama, don’t come out, understand?”

“You’re dead,” he said quietly. “You don’t look dead. You live at the bottom of the junction, don’t you? I remember, on the day we decided to get married, you took me on top of the levee and we went down and looked at the junction, and you told me that you had been down there. And that’s where you are now, isn’t it—at the bottom of the junction.”

“Billy—” Elinor began.

“Are you going back with Frances?” Billy asked his mother-in-law.

“Yes, she is,” answered Frances quickly.

“No, I’m not,” said Elinor. “I’m going to stay here with you, Billy.”

“Mama—”

“Shhh!” said Elinor. “I made my choice a long time ago, Frances. I made my choice on Easter Sunday of 1919, when I sat on the edge of that bed in the corner room of the Osceola. I’m not going back on that choice now.”

“You could come back, Mama!”

Elinor shook her head. She seemed to have forgotten that Billy was there, or perhaps she wanted him to hear.

“I can’t go back,” she said. “You make the choice once, and that’s all. You were born here, in this room, darling, and you made the choice to go back to the river. I was born—well, I wasn’t born in any feather bed—and one day when this whole town was under water, I saw a white man and a

colored man rowing along in a little green boat and I made *my* decision. So I'll finish out my time here."

"Mama, it's such a waste!" cried Frances.

"It's not a waste. I haven't regretted it for one single minute. Not even when Oscar died and I knew that it was Mary-Love and John Robert DeBordenave who killed him—that he died because of me and what I had done to them. I didn't even regret that, darling."

Frances slipped down off the edge of the bed onto the floor at her mother's feet.

"Mama, what will Nerita and I do without you? How am I supposed to let you grow old and die? You're already *so* old now!"

"There's nothing you can do, darling. Not a thing. I have Billy here"—she hadn't forgotten him, and reached up and grasped his hand—"and Billy will take care of me. Billy, that's why I've kept you on."

"Why?" he asked.

"To take care of me when I die."

"Elinor—" he began to protest.

"You and Zaddie are going to have to protect me," she said in a quiet voice.

"Protect you from what?" Frances cried, looking up into her mother's face.

"When the time comes, they'll know."

"Nerita and I will protect you! We'll protect you from whatever it is."

"You won't be able to," said Elinor, "but Billy and Zaddie will be here."

"Mama, do you know when it's going to be?"

Elinor only smiled. "I promise you, darling, that before it happens, I will come out into the river once more—just once more—and say goodbye to you and Nerita."

. . .

The day after the melancholy party, Lilah went back to New York and Mr. Woskoboinikow. Tommy Lee, distressed and forlorn, threw himself into the Caskey oil business with redoubled ardor. He was down at the wells every morning in time to speak to the third-shift workers before they drove back to their trailer homes in Cantonement and Jay. He talked to Miriam and to Billy on the telephone two or three times each day, and more than once he went with Miriam on business trips and was introduced about by her. Elinor

helped him in the selection of several new suits for these trips, and on the whole Tommy Lee made a good impression—if nothing else, he looked *substantial.* Besides, he came with Miriam's recommendation, and that counted for a lot in New York, Houston, and New Orleans.

It gradually became known in Babylon and Perdido that Tommy Lee had been disappointed in love. He had hoped, and all his family had hoped, that he would marry Lilah Bronze; but Lilah, herself trained by Miriam, had done a sort of Miriam-like thing and married herself to a man with a name that was two inches long and who declared on a stack of Bibles that he would never set foot in Alabama again. The civil rights business in Selma hadn't been all that long ago, and people hadn't quite forgiven the Northerners, the new Carpetbaggers, who had come down and interfered so mischievously. And Lilah Bronze had gone off and *married* one of those unprincipled men. However, through all this Tommy Lee had gained some depth in the eyes of the community because of his broken heart; people understood that he threw himself into his work in order to forget. Mamas kept their daughters away, "until the boy finds himself again." Tommy Lee, by this crook of history, became an adult without the burden of actually having to get married, the usual rite of passage in a man's development in Alabama.

Lucille and Grace were proud of Tommy Lee. They never forgot to thank God in their prayers each night, as the knelt beside each other at the edge of the bed, that Tommy Lee hadn't rebelled and run off to Chicago to fight the police, that he hadn't grown his hair long or swallowed LSD. They gave thanks that he was there with them most days at lunchtime, and every evening at suppertime; and that his laughter, raucous and echoing, could be heard all over the house at night as he watched television with his friends from the oil rigs.

. . .

Late one morning in the spring of 1970, Tommy Lee was paddling his boat through the swamp in a course that was as directly northward as the waterways and hummocks would allow. He didn't like to use the motor because of the noise it made and the smell of gasoline that poured up out of it, and besides, the exercise always served to increase his appetite, and considering the tortuousness of the swamp, paddling wasn't that much slower. He had spent the morning with the oilmen at rigs number 5 and 8, and was now heading back to the farm for lunch. He had grown used to the

swamp, and knew his way about well enough to find his way in and out, which was all that really mattered. He kept a small boat tethered at the southern extremity of the farm proper, just where the swamp began. In the bottom of the boat and under a tight tarpaulin, he had stored a case of beer, the rifle that Elinor had given him for Christmas a few years back, and the latest men's magazines in a plastic bag. The men's magazines were for himself—he was fearful of Grace or Lucille coming across them in the house; the beer was for the oil rig workers; and the rifle was for the alligators who occasionally swam lazily after his small boat, as if in hope that so large a morsel as Tommy Lee Burgess would faint from the heat and tumble over the edge of the boat into the oily water.

This morning, with his stomach growling, Tommy Lee paddled alone through the swamp, thinking of nothing but the lunch he knew that Luvadia was preparing for him. He had reached a point about a mile from the northernmost oil rig, but still half a mile from where he kept the boat tied up. By the sun's position he knew he was heading in the right direction, so he didn't pay much attention to the particular scenery through which he was passing. It all looked very much alike in one place as another anyway.

Tommy Lee decided that Luvadia was cooking either fried corn or okra for him. The more he thought about it he hoped that it wasn't going to be just okra, and no fried corn at all. Tommy Lee didn't understand how *anyone* could like okra unless it was deep-fried with lots of batter, and then you had to pretend it was soggy shrimp inside. His boat must have passed over a shallow spot, for his paddle suddenly caught in the mud. The boat jerked, and Tommy Lee fell forward, knocking his knees painfully against the case of beer.

He had let go of the paddle, and it remained sticking upward in that mud. The boat wavered and swayed as Tommy Lee righted himself and reached for the paddle.

The paddle suddenly lifted itself and flew high into the air.

Tommy Lee, astounded, watched its ascent, and his mouth fell open as it hung in the air for a moment before falling back into the water, twenty yards or so from the boat.

Tommy Lee looked over the side, and saw that something looked back at him through the oily black water—a round flat face, either green or black, he couldn't tell for certain, with perfectly circular bulging eyes, a wide lipless mouth, and two dilated holes for nostrils.

It was not his reflection, for it distinctly lay beneath the surface of the water. It was not at all like an alligator, or any kind of fish ever caught in these—or any other—waters. It was not a drowned animal snared in the submerged roots of one of the cypresses. It was not anything at all within Tommy Lee's experience. And Tommy Lee didn't have a paddle anymore.

He turned right around in the boat, and pulled the cord on the motor, praying that it would start. *Last week,* he thought, *that's when I used it last. No, not last week, last month.*

The motor didn't start.

Tommy Lee pulled the cord again. The motor gurgled, then died.

Suddenly the boat was jerked backward. Tommy Lee lost his balance for a moment and slipped awkwardly off the seat onto the bottom of the boat. As he struggled to get back up, at the same time reaching for the motor, the boat was tipped precariously to the right. Tommy Lee reached out to grab the sides of the boat in an attempt to right it by casting his weight to the left, but his right hand touched not the edge of the boat, but something else—something quite wet and slippery.

He jerked his hand away and looked. There was an arm, definitely greenish-gray and not black at all, ending in a wide, splayed, webbed hand, thrust over the edge of the boat. The hand was pressed flat against the seat.

Tommy Lee grabbed the plastic package of men's magazines and hit the hand with it. The hand didn't even flinch. Tommy Lee flung the magazines aside, picked up the rifle and banged the hand with the butt. The hand seemed to curl slightly and give a little quiver, but it remained pressed against the seat. Tommy Lee realized then that the boat was moving slowly away to the right. The thing wasn't trying to climb up into the boat, it was only swimming away with it.

Tommy Lee didn't dare look over the side.

He turned the rifle around and took aim at the hand. Yet he did not shoot, suddenly realizing that the bullet might pierce not only the hand, but the seat and the bottom of the boat as well. He did not relish foundering in the swamp with *that.*

He tried, without making too much disturbance, to get the motor going but it would not start. The boat was moving inexorably toward one of the larger hummocks in that part of the swamp, one that Tommy Lee recognized; one to which he had even given a name. He called it the Nest, because of all the alligators' nests that fringed it.

Not knowing what else to do, he sat next to the motor and repeatedly pulled the cord, keeping an eye on the hand as he did so and trying to keep the rifle from slipping off his lap.

The motor started at last. He turned the rudder, and gave it all the gas.

The boat still moved inexorably toward the Nest. The power of the motor could not affect the direction of the boat by even a single degree.

With his leg pressed against the rudder to keep it in position, Tommy Lee raised the rifle and stared through the sights at the elbow of the creature where it appeared atop the edge of the boat. When it stood out of the water —if it could stand—Tommy Lee would shoot it.

He now began to think that the boat was moving too slowly. *Faster, faster,* he thought. Every few seconds, he had to wipe away the sweat on his hands and brow.

As the boat neared the Nest, for once he saw no alligators. All the nests appeared to have been abandoned. He heard no birds, but he did hear something else. A singing—there was no other word for it—high-pitched, droning, like nothing he had ever heard. He peered into the high grass and the trunks of the cypress on the Nest but could see nothing. Then, at the same moment that he noticed two mounds of dried grass that looked almost like huts large enough for a large man to crawl into half-hidden among the dense scrub, he heard a second voice in unison with the first. After a few moments, however, it branched off into a melody of its own, with a slightly different quality. The boat was being drawn ever nearer the large hummock of dry grass, massive cypress, and tangled underbrush.

Then, quite without warning, the boat swung around and floated alongside the hummock, past half a dozen large empty alligator nests. In some of them Tommy Lee could count the eggs, and when did alligators ever abandon their eggs? He could hear the two voices quite clearly now. Through the sight of the rifle he picked out their locations on the hummock. He was quite certain of their positions in that high grass; he wondered if he ought to shoot. Without even having consciously made that decision, he cocked the rifle and was about to pull the trigger when he was startled by the sound of something pulling up out of the water, and the addition of a third voice to that singing, a third voice that at first was gurgly, but soon became as clear and pristine as the two others. Over the edge of the boat, Tommy Lee saw a large flat perfectly smooth head. Its features were turned away from him.

Tommy Lee moved the gun forward until the barrel was no more than a foot from the back of that glistening head.

"Nerita!" The word came sharply across the water from the high grass.

The head disappeared beneath the water.

Tommy Lee automatically swung the rifle and took aim for the place from where he had heard the voice. He pulled the trigger and the rifle fired, knocking him painfully against the motor with its recoil. The boat had evidently been released by the creature that had had control of it, for now the motor shot the boat away from the large hummock.

Tommy Lee grasped hold of the tiller and sped away, not the way he had come but around the Nest, and away toward Gavin Pond Farm. He held the rifle across his lap, flung the case of beer and the men's magazines into the water and never once looked back.

He refused to look back not for fear of what he might see, but for fear of what he *had* seen.

It was not another creature that had stood up from behind one of those two grassy mounds in the center of the Nest, not another gray-green thing with circular staring eyes and a wide lipless mouth and a smooth round head; it had been Elinor Caskey, an old woman, an old woman he knew very well, her face contorted with fear, screaming *Nerita!* And it was Elinor Caskey that Tommy Lee had shot. The bullet had made a small black circle in her bared breast.

When he reached the farm he ran the boat right up through the reeds at the edge of the new pasture and leaped out, stamping through the mud. He groped his way through the strands of the barbed-wire fence at the edge of the pasture and ran all the way back to the house, trailing the barrel of the gun along behind him as he went.

Though the sun that morning had risen in a cloudless sky, and the radio had predicted fair weather for all this day and the next, it was now raining —and raining heavily—by the time Tommy Lee reached the house. His boots and trousers had gotten caked with mud when he had jumped out of the boat, but the rain washed it off and mingled it with the churning mud at the edge of the brick patio. He was sweating with fear and exertion; the rain poured down from the sky and saturated his clothing until he could smell and taste and feel nothing but that. Tommy Lee was scratched and bleeding

in a dozen places, but as fast as he bled the rain washed the blood away and drummed it into the earth.

Chapter 85

Rain

It rains now, a rain less impressive for its intensity than for its unvarying relentlessness, soaking the sandy yards around the Caskey houses steadily all morning, all afternoon, all evening, and throughout the night. Billy Bronze hears it as he rises from his bed, and it continues throughout his unhappy day and into his unhappy sleep at night, without ever a slackening, or even an increase that could optimistically be interpreted as the darkness before the dawn. The water pours down the roof on all sides of the house, overwhelming the inadequate gutters, falling to the front steps below in a sheet of water heavy enough to smash an umbrella. It cascades into the flower beds that edge the house, digging sharp deep trenches and dislodging bulbs and tubers. It blows against sills and windows, opaquely filling a hundred thousand minute squares in the rusting screens.

The rain is an incessant thunder, inexorable and unnerving, louder than conversation, louder than music, louder than the bus to Mobile careering along the road at a quarter past four. The rain forces Billy to listen for patterns and rhythms that are broken as soon as captured. The sound of rain blots out his thoughts as he rocks in one of the swings on the screened-in porch upstairs; but that—it occurs to him just before giving up trying to think altogether—is just as well, for he does not like to consider that in her room inside, Elinor Caskey lies dying.

How she had been brought home, Billy does not know and never asked. He only knows that late in the afternoon when the rain first began Zaddie knocked on the door of his office and beckoned to him. Zaddie led him to Elinor's bedroom, and there on the bed, still in her drenched clothes, and smelling strongly of the Perdido, lay Elinor Caskey. She tore back the top of her blouse and there he saw, an inch or two over her heart, a small black bullet hole.

"Hold down my legs," she commanded Billy.

Obediently, Billy sat at the foot of the bed and pressed his hands over Elinor's ankles. Zaddie went around to the other side and pressed against Elinor's knees. Billy had no idea what was going on.

“Have you called the doctor?” he asked. “Where is the doctor, Zaddie?”

“No doctor,” said Elinor.

“You could die!” Billy protested.

“I *will* die,” said Elinor solemnly.

“Who shot you?” Billy asked. “What happened?”

Elinor did not answer. With her head propped on two pillows, she looked down at the wound in her breast. She put her thumb and forefinger together and pushed them inside the small black hole. She hissed through her teeth, and her entire body twisted and bucked. She would have turned over or fallen off the bed, had not Billy and Zaddie so tightly held her legs.

She hissed and screamed—and finally pulled out the bullet.

She lay panting for perhaps two minutes, holding the small lead missile tightly clenched in the palm of her hand. Zaddie wiped her brow with a cloth.

“Tommy Lee did it,” said Zaddie.

“Why?” cried Billy in amazement.

“He didn’t mean to,” whispered Elinor. “It wasn’t his fault.”

“Elinor, we have—”

“We don’t have to do anything,” said Elinor. “I’m going to lie here in this bed until I die, and you and Zaddie are going to protect me.”

“Protect you from what?” Billy demanded.

There was silence for a long moment.

“Billy,” said Elinor after having gathered the strength to speak, “I want you to go and make two telephone calls. Call Tommy Lee and tell him to come into town because I need to speak to him. Call Miriam and tell her that I’m sick and that she should come see me tomorrow. Don’t call anybody else. If you call the doctor, I won’t see him, and I won’t speak to you again. Do you understand?”

Billy nodded, and did just as he was asked.

Tommy Lee came that afternoon and entered the house wet, abashed, guilty—and fearful. Billy took him upstairs to Elinor’s room, then waited curiously to see what Elinor would say to him.

But Elinor sent both Billy and Zaddie away, and was alone with Tommy Lee for several minutes. Tommy Lee emerged from that interview more shaken than he had been when he came into the house. He hurried out

into the rain, threw himself into his pickup, and barreled off down the flooded road.

"I had to make sure he wouldn't say anything foolish," said Elinor later. "Tommy Lee won't say anything. We don't have to worry about *that."*

Miriam came the next day, as Elinor had requested, and by then Elinor was weaker, but she looked more presentable. Zaddie had bathed her and got her into a nightgown and embroidered bed jacket. The rain continued to pour. Miriam said, "Mama, you look perfectly awful."

"I'm going to die, Miriam."

"Soon, you mean?"

Elinor nodded. "I just wanted you to know that everything is in order —the will, and all the rest of it. Billy knows everything."

"Good," said Miriam. "But I knew that you'd be ready when the time came." She looked at her mother closely. "Are you sure the time has come?" Elinor nodded. "I'm sorry for that," said Miriam briskly. "I really am."

"I think you mean that," said Elinor.

"Are Zaddie and Billy taking care of you?" Miriam asked. "You want me to send Malcolm off for anything?"

"Yes. I want you and Malcolm both to do something for me."

"What's that?"

"One last request, Miriam."

"I won't promise, Mama. But what is it?"

"I don't want you around when I die. I want you and Malcolm to leave town until I'm dead."

"Go away! Mama, I cain't just up and leave the mill—"

"Yes, you can. So do it. Go away until I'm dead. You don't want to be around here anyway, tending to me."

"I wouldn't be tending to you anyway," remarked Miriam. "But where do you want us to go?"

"Go visit Lilah. Go to Houston. If you really have to stay in the area go out and stay with Grace and Lucille. Lord knows they've got plenty of room out there."

"Mama, why don't you want Malcolm and me here?"

"I have my reasons," said Elinor. "And they're good ones. Go away, Miriam. Go away tonight. Or tomorrow. No later than tomorrow."

“Well,” said Miriam. “I still haven’t promised. I’ll have to speak to Malcolm.”

“Malcolm will do what you say.”

“Mama,” said Miriam with some delicacy, “how long do you imagine that Malcolm and I will have to stay away?”

“Miriam,” remarked her mother dryly, “what I’ve left you in my will is going to make up for the inconvenience.”

Miriam returned to the house the next morning with Malcolm and they spoke brief goodbyes to Elinor. The rain kept up.

“You ought to see it out there, Elinor,” said Malcolm, shaking his head. “The whole damn yard is about to wash away.”

“Where are you two going?”

“Someplace dry,” said Miriam.

“Houston for a few days, and then to New York,” said Malcolm. “After that, I don’t know where.”

“Goodbye, then,” said Elinor. She reached up weakly and took Malcolm’s hand and squeezed it. “You be good to Miriam,” she said.

Malcolm laughed. “You tell her to be good to *me!”*

Miriam dropped down onto the side of the bed. She took Elinor’s other hand and drew it to her breast. She leaned down and kissed Elinor’s cheek.

When Miriam drew back, she saw a tear in Elinor’s eye.

“Mama,” said Miriam, “that’s the first time I have ever seen you cry.”

Elinor smiled wanly. “It’s the first time you ever kissed me.”

Miriam stood up. “Goodbye, Mama.”

“Goodbye, darling,” replied Elinor. “Be good to Malcolm. He probably deserves it.”

Zaddie stood at the door downstairs and gave Miriam and Malcolm umbrellas before they stepped out onto the front porch.

“Will you call me?” Miriam quietly asked Zaddie. Zaddie nodded silently. Malcolm led his wife out to their car. It was only a dozen yards away, but by the time they reached it, despite the umbrellas and their haste, they were sodden with rainwater.

. . .

Rain has fallen incessantly on Perdido for the past seven days, more than twenty-six inches of precipitation in all. At first, for most people, this persistent inclemency had been nothing more than an excuse to complain—for once with sufficient cause—about the state of the weather. Perdido

merchants were certain that customers were being discouraged from driving downtown; and for the farmers, who recently had completed spring planting, it was a disaster. Seedlings were beaten back into the earth or washed down their own furrows to float in thick clots in drainage ditches. Not-yet-sprouted seeds rotted in the earth. With each day the rain continued, the dread of the people in the town increased, for it was no longer simply a question of the nuisance of umbrellas and soggy newspapers, no longer only a matter of reduced retail receipts—it was the threat of another flood.

It did not matter much in fact whether it rained on Perdido or not, but whether there was precipitation in the vast forests northeast and northwest of town was of great concern. Water falling there would wash down the gently sloping land into the Perdido and the Blackwater rivers and would swell those streams from their sources to the junction behind the Perdido town hall. In short, if it continued to rain in the forests where the water and the wetness inconvenienced no one at all, it might very well flood in Perdido.

After the fourth day of rain the weather reports on the Perdido radio station, and even those over the television stations in Pensacola and Mobile, well removed from the danger, had begun to give the heights of the rivers along with daily and cumulative totals of the rainfall. On the seventh day of rain an army engineer was sent down from Fort Rucca to inspect the Perdido levees, for already the water was higher than at any time since 1919.

That engineer drove his jeep to the top of the levee behind the town hall, prodded the earth with a spade, pulled a few blackberry bushes out of the side of the embankment, peered through the rain to the opposite bank of the swollen rivers with his field glasses, and tried to ignore the questions of the mayor, who had insisted on accompanying him on this tour of inspection.

From the mayor’s house, where he had been invited to lunch, the engineer telephoned Fort Rucca and requested his superior to come down to Perdido that afternoon. In fact, to depart immediately. The mayor and his wife overheard this conversation and were unsettled by it. They became even more worried when the army engineer asked them where a helicopter might set down in the town.

At quarter of two, the army engineer—and each and every one of the town’s municipal workers—watched the helicopter descend through the

rain into a cleared space in the town hall parking lot. A colonel and two other men, one of them a civilian, emerged. They shook hands with the mayor, then drove off in the first engineer's jeep, peremptorily declining the mayor's offer to tag along.

At half past four, all four men arrived at the mayor's house on Live Oak Street—low land—and informed him that the levee was not safe and might collapse if the water were to reach a level higher than thirty-two feet. At this time the rivers already were at twenty-eight feet. The mayor, as well as his wife and cook, who were listening from the kitchen, were aghast and wanted to know how on earth the levee, which had protected Perdido for more than four decades, could be considered unsafe—it had always been thought of as the most substantial construction in town.

"There are places," the engineer said with a shrug, "where the levee is very weak. Here and there some of the vegetation burned and the levee eroded. There are places that weren't built right in the first place. There's even a break down by the railroad track near the junction. It wasn't kept in repair."

"There's never been enough money," the mayor argued weakly. The engineer shrugged again. "What can we do?" the mayor asked then.

The colonel spoke now, glancing out the window where the rain was falling steadily. He was uncomfortable, for his uniform was wet through and he had an upset stomach from the journey in the helicopter. "I'll send down some men. They'll start arriving tonight and tomorrow. They can try to shore up the levee, filling sandbags, evacuate people if need be, that sort of thing. Can't promise anything, though, can't promise they'll do any good. The only thing I *can* promise is that they'll be here working their goddamn asses off to save this town."

"Save it," repeated the mayor in whispered alarm. "What happens," he went on tremulously, "if the levee does break?"

"Well," said one of the other engineers, a younger man who did not understand the niceties of evasion and prevarication, "the water breaks through in one place, and it takes a hell of a lot more of the levee with it. A wall of water rushes in. You'd better have already gotten your people out, because there won't be anyone or anything left in the path of that water. The water would rush in so fast that it would be better to have had no levee at all."

What the man said was accurate, but the colonel and the other engineers glared at him: they had wanted to persuade the mayor, not frighten him, into the advisability of evacuation.

"The hospital..." said the colonel. "Where is the hospital in this town?"

"On high ground," replied the mayor's wife, who entered now with coffee and towels.

"Just as well," said the officer, and no more.

. . .

No one in Perdido noticed that Elinor Caskey had not been out of her house in ten days. For ten days the rain had fallen, and Perdido thought of nothing but that. Some children were taken out of the school and sent to their grandparents in places where it wasn't raining and there was no danger of flooding. Those who had beach houses at Gulf Shores or Destin were suddenly overwhelmed with a desire to visit those places, though April was still quite early in the season for the beach. Quietly, at Billy Bronze's suggestion, all the important files of the mill were packed up and taken out to Gavin Pond Farm. It was true that the farmhouse was no more than half a mile from the river, but it was situated on much higher ground than Perdido, and unlikely to be inundated. When that was done, Tommy Lee went to Elinor's house and took away the files in Billy's office, too. And so, day by day, and little by little, Tommy Lee took everything that was important to the Caskeys—including the boxes of jewelry in the bottom of Miriam's dresser—out to Gavin Pond Farm. Grace and Lucille had made so many additions to the house over the years that there was plenty of room for everything to be stored.

After his first interview with Elinor in her bed Tommy Lee did not visit her again; in fact, when he and Escue went to the house to collect some records from Billy's office, Tommy Lee sidled quickly past the door to Elinor's room.

Lucille and Grace did pay a visit to Elinor, a single visit of state, quite formal and brief.

Lucille, looking more and more like Queenie every day, and already surpassing her mother in the matter of girth, stood at the window and looked out. Through the curtain of water that spilled off the roof, Lucille could see the gently twisted narrow trunks of the water oaks that Elinor had planted before she was married to Oscar. She heard their branches creaking beneath the weight of the water, and once after a sodden *crack*, she saw a

large branch, leafless and rotten, fall from the very top of the tree to the ground, where it landed with a loud splash in the sheet of shallow water that covered the yard. Lucille did not want to look at Elinor. Tommy Lee had told them that Elinor was dying.

Grace had pulled a chair up close to the side of the bed.

"Tommy Lee says you are dying," said Grace. "Did he know what he was talking about?"

Elinor nodded solemnly. "I am dying," she said.

"Are you in pain?" Grace asked.

"Yes," said Elinor.

"Is there anything Lucille and I can do?"

"No," said Elinor. "One thing," she amended.

"What?" said Lucille, turning with alacrity. She felt helpless, and was glad to hear there was *something* to be done for Elinor.

Elinor spoke softly, but with deliberation. "Tell Tommy Lee that it was not his fault."

Grace and Lucille exchanged glances.

"Does he think it was?" asked Grace. When Elinor nodded, Grace said, "What is wrong with you, Elinor?"

Elinor shook her head. "Just make sure Tommy Lee knows that it wasn't his fault."

Lucille was about to speak, but Grace said quickly and with finality. "We will. It wasn't his fault," she repeated, as if to get the message straight.

"You're tired," said Lucille solicitously. "We'll come back tomorrow."

"No," said Elinor. "Say goodbye now."

"You have to let us come back!" exclaimed Lucille.

"Stay out at the farm," said Elinor. "Don't come back into town."

"Why not?" asked Grace.

"Because the levee is going to break," said Elinor. "And I don't want you to get caught."

Lucille involuntarily glanced out of the window at the kudzu-covered embankment beyond the water oaks. "It's not gone break, Elinor!"

"Are you sure?" said Grace to Elinor, ignoring Lucille's wishful thinking. Elinor nodded. "Then you ought to let us take you out to the farm where you'll be safe. Lucille, start packing Elinor a bag."

"No," said Elinor. "I'm staying here."

"And get washed away?" Lucille demanded.

Elinor only smiled.

"What about Billy and Zaddie?" asked Grace. "What happens to them if the levee breaks? You ought to let them bring you out to the farm. We've got so much room!"

"I'm tired," said Elinor weakly. "Say goodbye to me and go back out to the farm. You'll be safe there."

Lucille and Grace stood at the side of the bed holding hands.

"I cain't say goodbye!" exclaimed Lucille. "Oh, Elinor, don't make me say goodbye!"

"Goodbye, Lucille. Queenie was very proud of you. We've all been proud of you."

Lucille turned away and began to weep softly.

"Goodbye, Elinor," said Grace.

"Open that top drawer," said Elinor. "And take out the box that's right at the front."

Grace did so; inside the box were Elinor's black pearls.

"James gave those to Genevieve," said Elinor. "They should come to you now."

"No," said Grace. "I couldn't take them."

"Mary-Love got all of Genevieve's other jewelry, and Miriam has it now. Miriam's not likely to give any of it up, so take the pearls, Grace."

"I'll wait," she said softly.

"You can't wait. When I die, I'm not leaving anything behind." Elinor glanced around the room and smiled. "Not a thing. If you don't take them now, those pearls will be lost forever, and I'd hate to think of that happening."

Grace nodded and put the box of pearls into her purse.

"You're the only one left who was alive when I came to Perdido," said Elinor. "It's hard to believe they're all dead."

"I remember," said Grace. "I remember sitting on your knee out at Miz Driver's church. I remember when you came to live with Daddy and me."

"A long time ago. You were such a little girl back then—a prissy little girl." Elinor laughed softly.

"I loved you very much, Elinor," said Grace simply. "I always have. I do now."

"It hurts me to say goodbye," said Elinor. "To you especially."

Grace leaned over the bed and quickly embraced Elinor. Then she stood up, wiped her eyes, and walked out of the room. Lucille quickly followed.

"Goodbye! Goodbye!" Elinor called weakly after them until her voice was lost to them beneath the beating of the rain against the windows of the house.

. . .

On the eleventh day of rain, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officially advised all residents of Perdido to evacuate the town and move to higher ground. Many had already done so, and those who had stubbornly stayed, trusting the levee and their own good luck, gave second thoughts to the advisability of remaining in a town that might very soon be washed away. The foolhardily curious climbed the levee, and were astonished at the height of the water. The grove of live oaks north of the junction was now no more than a black field of water punctuated by monumental green domes. The forests to the northwest of Perdido were flooded, and no logging could be done within ten miles of the town. To the northeast, the swamp in which the Blackwater River had its source had long since overflowed its bounds and the road between Perdido and Atmore was closed. To the south of town, the Perdido was more than twice its usual width; shrubs and small trees along its banks were drowned, and a number of even the biggest trees had been uprooted by the pressure of the flowing black water.

The National Guard had been in town for three days, sandbagging the levee, and knocking on the doors of every house to make certain that the residents were alert to the danger. Downtown shops closed, and trucks were loaded with merchandise to be stored temporarily on high ground. The Caskey mill shut down under orders from Miriam—now in New York City—and most of the workers left town. All the lumber and other wood products that had been warehoused in the vicinity were trucked down to Bay Minette, not because Bay Minette was convenient, but because the road to the southwest was the only one that seemed safe against flooding. A siren was installed in the room beneath the clocks in the town hall, and its sounding was to be the warning that the levee had broken.

The installation of that siren convinced the doubting Thomases of Perdido, as nothing else had before, that the town lay in great danger. The National Guard, these people considered, was always doing something or other to keep their men busy, and they might as well fill sandbags as

anything else. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was always looking for an excuse to throw its weight around and declare this and that construction unsafe and dangerous. The mayor always grabbed any opportunity to appear important and capable. The sandbags, the engineers' warnings, and the mayor's frenzied busyness could be shrugged off, but that siren in the room beneath the town hall clocks could not be. The rivers were at thirty-one feet, and everyone—or almost everyone—left town.

The patients in the Perdido hospital had all been transferred to Bay Minette or Mobile. Because the hospital was on high ground, the National Guard now slept in its beds at night. They were confident that the town had been completely evacuated.

The supports for the bridge that crossed from downtown to Baptist Bottom had been weakened by the water, and on the evening of the twelfth day of rain the bridge came loose. The underpinnings of the Baptist Bottom side went first, and with terrible creakings and snappings the bridge swung southward along the line of the current. Two unlucky National Guardsmen were walking across the bridge at the time, their jeep having stalled in a huge puddle in Baptist Bottom. They ran and jumped for the levee just as the bridge was knocked completely loose. One of them made it, but the other slipped in the mud of the levee and slid into the water. He caught, for a moment, onto a twisted piling of the bridge that remained. His hands and arms were torn as he attempted to climb out of the reach of the rushing water. The noise made by the bridge as it was wracked and crumbled was deafening; the incessant rain out of the black sky was blinding. The National Guardsmen who had gained the safety of the levee heard his friend scream from his precarious perch on that tilted piling, and he *thought* he saw him dragged under the water—by two long arms that ended in flat webbed hands.

. . .

Billy Bronze sat in the dark on the upstairs screened-in porch on the evening of the twelfth day of rain. The screens were opaque with rainwater. Rainwater splashed on the half-railing all around the porch. Rainwater still poured in a steady sheet from the eaves of the house.

He sat in the dark, for at night now he and Zaddie did not turn on any lights except in Elinor's room, and there the curtains were tightly drawn. The National Guard had been there three days ago, and Billy had promised them that he would go away within the hour. Zaddie had gone around,

locking up, drawing the curtains, just as if they had intended to leave. Elinor would not go, and Zaddie and Billy had no intention of abandoning her.

It occurred to him now, almost for the first time, that this loyalty might mean his own death, and Zaddie's. If the levee behind the house broke, then they and the house were sure to be swept away. He and Zaddie would be drowned or crushed in the catastrophe.

He pondered this for some time, not out of fear, but as a way to pass the time. It somehow did not seem so much for Elinor to ask; he certainly had no intention of remonstrating with her on the matter. Even if she did die before the levee broke—even if she were dead *now*, he thought, glancing over his shoulder—he and Zaddie would probably stay on with the corpse until the rains subsided and the rivers receded. Or until the river broke through the levee. It somehow wouldn't be right to carry Elinor's body out through the rain.

He continued to sit and rock slowly in the swing, and though it grew late, he did not listen for the slow and surreptitious footsteps to come up the stairs on a visit to Elinor. Frances and Nerita—he thought of those visitors by name now—had stayed away since Elinor had appeared with the bullet hole in her breast. They had not come since the day that the rain began its assault on Perdido.

He rose and went inside. There was something a little frightening about being in a house that was supposed to be empty, in a town that had been evacuated, knowing that the siren, if and when it blew, would blow to warn them alone, they who would not heed its warning. Billy felt himself an intruder in that dark silent house. Only Elinor's bedroom, with a single lamp burning with pine-scented oil—and burning always, throughout the black night and the dark, rain-sodden days—seemed of any comfort to him at all. And that room housed a dying old woman.

He was turning the knob on the door to Elinor's sitting room when he thought he heard a noise at the far end of the hallway, something that wasn't rain, that wasn't the creaking of furniture, something that was as surreptitious as those footsteps of Frances's had once been. Billy did not pause, but pushed open the door of the sitting room and went inside. Long accustomed to the darkness, he found the line of light around the door into Elinor's bedroom blinding. He stood a few moments until his eyes had adjusted, and then went in.

Thin and pale and looking ancient with all her makeup long washed off, her eyes closed, and her feeble hands curled palms up atop the neatly folded covers, Elinor Caskey lay in the center of the bed. She was the very picture of a dying woman, like an old engraving—sentimental and pretty—of how such a thing *ought* to be done. Zaddie lay sleeping on a cot at the side of the bed; she stirred drowsily as Billy entered. She and Billy did not leave Elinor alone for a minute.

Elinor slowly opened her eyes and, seeing Billy, smiled.

"How are you?" he asked quietly.

"Poor Billy," she said. "You won't have much longer to wait."

Billy shrugged, and went and sat on the edge of the bed. Elinor hadn't the strength to move her hands, but he saw them trembling there, and grasped them both.

"Tonight," Elinor said, "you stay with me—you and Zaddie, both of you, all night long, you hear?"

Billy's eyebrows creased, but he did not argue. If he had accepted her refusal to see a doctor or enter the hospital, was he going to balk at such a minor point as this?

"Zaddie," said Elinor. "Wake up."

Though Elinor's voice was scarcely a whisper, Zaddie instantly roused herself. "Ma'am?"

"Go downstairs and fix some food for you and Billy. Don't worry about the lights. Nobody's going to be out tonight. Then bring it back up here. Go now, and don't dawdle."

Zaddie did just as she was told. When she had gone, Elinor said to Billy, "Get out the box of keys that's in the second drawer of the bureau. Go through them and find the ones that fit the sitting room door and the door of this room." She closed her eyes then, as if the effort to say even that much had cost her a lot.

The sitting room door had never been locked before. Neither had the door of this bedroom. Billy knew that. He went through a dozen keys before he found the two that turned the tumblers in the locks. He then waited at the door of the sitting room for Zaddie to return. In a few moments she came up the stairs bearing a tray with sandwiches and beer. He opened the door for her, and then whispered, "I'm just going to get my glasses. I'll be right back."

He went across the hall to his own room, fumbled for the right case on top of the dresser, tried to think if there was anything else he might need but could think of nothing. Then he was startled to hear, above the noise of the rain, two voices. They came from inside the house and they were not those of Elinor and Zaddie; they were of a woman and a child, and they came from the front room.

Slipping his glasses into the pocket of his shirt, without thinking he went to the door to the linen closet. He quietly turned the handle and pulled it slowly open. That closed windowless corridor was pitch dark at first, but then Billy could see that the door at its opposite end was slowly being opened. There in the dim light that suffused the front room, he could see an old woman with her hand on the knob. Billy did not recognize her. Next to her was a child whom he did not recognize either. The old woman gave a little smile, pointed at Billy, then pushed the boy into the corridor. The boy, holding out his hands before him, stumbled down between the shelves of sheets and towels toward Billy.

Billy slammed the door shut, and rushed out of his room and across the hallway, not even glancing back. He stumbled into the sitting room and slammed the door closed. He pulled what he thought was the right key from his pocket and slipped it quickly into the lock. The key did not turn. He jerked it out, and tried a second key. This one did turn, but even before Billy had taken his hand away, he saw the knob of the door turning.

"Go away," he whispered.

He stepped quickly into Elinor's bedroom, blinded by the light once more. He carefully shut the door, and locked it also.

Elinor slowly opened her eyes and looked at him with such profound knowing that he asked automatically, "Who were they?"

"Mary-Love," said Elinor.

"Oscar's mother? She was dead before—" He abruptly ceased to argue. "And the boy?"

"His name is John Robert DeBordenave. He used to live in the house beyond James's."

"When?" asked Billy.

"A long time ago. Right, Zaddie?" said Elinor with a smile. "You remember John Robert? When you and Grace were little and Mary-Love tried to make Grace play with him instead of you?"

Zaddie said to Billy, “John Robert was lacking in the head,” as if that explained why Zaddie was old and John Robert still looked no more than ten.

“Is that why we’re locking the door?” Billy asked.

Elinor closed her eyes, as if she didn’t intend to waste her strength responding to questions with answers that were obvious.

“What do we do now?” Billy asked.

“Now?” echoed Elinor. “Now we wait.”

. . .

Zaddie and Billy sat with Elinor long into that night. Billy moved his chair from near the door to a place near the window. When he sat near the door, he could hear the distant relentless scraping outside the sitting room door. When he was near the window he could hear nothing but the rain.

As Elinor grew weaker, the rain seemed to fall harder. So Zaddie and Billy sat, silent and watching, as Elinor Caskey moved slowly toward death. They waited for that death to come, or for the rain to stop, or for the siren’s wail across the town through the sound of the falling water—though it might be, both Zaddie and Billy knew, that the water would arrive without any warning at all.

Suddenly there was a loud crash in the next room, and before Billy and Zaddie even had time to realize that it had been the sound of the sitting room door being broken open, they saw the knob on the bedroom door turn, first slowly, then frantically. When that was of no avail, the scratching and low pounding began closer to hand, right on the other side of the door.

Billy and Zaddie glanced at one another, and then at Elinor.

Her eyes were open now, and her face was serene.

“Give me your hands,” she whispered.

On her left was Zaddie, and Zaddie took Elinor’s hand. On her right was Billy Bronze, and Billy took her other hand.

Billy and Zaddie leaned close to hear her words. The rain beat riotously against the windows. There was pounding against the door of the bedroom, incessant and now crazed sounding.

“Goodbye, Billy. You became my son.”

Billy said nothing, but squeezed Elinor’s unresponsive hand tighter.

“Goodbye, Zaddie. We were good to each other, weren’t we?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Zaddie. “We sure were.”

Thunder now came, and the rain beat against the house, and in thunder the blows against the bedroom door were redoubled, and over the top of it all came two screams: one of frustration just beyond the shaking bedroom door, and one all over the town itself as the siren in the room beneath the town hall clocks began to wail. The levee had burst.

The door of the bedroom flew open, and Zaddie and Billy had one glimpse there of Mary-Love and John Robert, pale, white, and dead.

Elinor closed her eyes. “Goodbye,” she whispered then, without hurry and without fear, and was gone.

. . .

The levee split in two places at once. The western side of the Perdido, just where the bridge had been, had always been a weak spot. The bridge, in tearing itself away, had taken with it many tons of hard-packed clay, and flowing water in patient and tenacious eddies had eaten away much more over the past few hours. Deeper and deeper inroads had been made, until at last, precisely at half past three in the morning, the water of the combined Perdido and Blackwater rivers broke through entirely. In a matter of moments, the line of stores along the eastern side of Palafox Street was shoved right across the street into the line of stores opposite. In another minute everything was splinters and shards of glass and mounds of paper, all blackened with water. The livelihoods of tradesmen were transformed in an instant into a battering ram of debris which, in a dozen different directions at once, hurled itself against the rest of the town. The flood swept swiftly along, tearing up streets, telephone poles, trees, and houses. Whole buildings were smashed into atoms of timber no larger than toothpicks. Others simply had their second stories sheared off, and whole furnished rooms coasted off on the surface of the inexorable black tide until they smashed against a tree or some other building, and became themselves instruments of destruction.

On the eastern side of the town, the levee was sundered just behind the Caskey mill, a hundred yards or so before the Blackwater reached the junction. That smaller river had less force than the Perdido below the junction, but the damage it did was complete. The Caskey warehouses, outbuildings, offices, trucks, and oil storage facilities were first inundated, then either shivered to bits or else lifted up and carried into Baptist Bottom where, one by one, as if God had possessed a municipal map and were checking off the meager dwellings in malign sequence, the houses of

Baptist Bottom and all the belongings of the poor people who had lived there were crushed beneath tons of black water and debris. Several large oil tanks had been broken open, and now the surface of the flood was covered with a lugubrious sheen.

And still the rain cascaded down upon the scene of destruction.

The National Guardsmen stationed on the roof of the hospital peered through their field glasses. In the blackness they had seen nothing, and their first indication that the levees had burst had been the explosive noise of the water suddenly surging into the town. That was when the siren was sounded, but the siren blew for no more than a few seconds before all the power in the town was lost. Without further heralding, the water set about to wipe Perdido from the face of the earth.

. . .

The levee behind the Caskey houses held, but it made little difference. Before the levee had burst downtown, water had begun to spill over the top of the embankment. Black water tumbled through the kudzu vines and covered the yards with a sheet of water that grew higher by the minute. When the levee finally did cave in downtown, the water increased even more rapidly, but because a small residential hill and several thick stands of trees lay between the Caskey houses and the major break, the debris was kept at bay. Only the water came, lapping in waves against the foundations of Elinor's house, then breaking against the first-floor windows, smashing in the stained glass in the front parlor, spilling into the rooms, swirling about under the legs of the furniture, surging into the hearths and gouging out all the accumulated years of ashes and soot. Water rose through the floorboards into all the rooms, overturning delicate furniture, smashing small objects against the walls, pushing debris from room to room. Water crept up the stairs to the second floor. And all this in blackness, and with not as much noise as the continuing crashing of the rain outside the house.

But the rain was slackening.

Upstairs, Elinor Caskey lay dead.

At the moment of her death, the terrible apparitions in the doorway—Mary-Love and John Robert—had simply disappeared. They were no longer there. The broken, battered door swung shut of its own accord. Zaddie sat on the edge of the bed, still holding Elinor's hand. Billy went to the door and opened it. He looked out and saw nothing. He went through the sitting room and into the hallway. What he heard was the water sloshing

about downstairs; he leaned over the banister and looked down. He saw black water on the lower stairs. It was already three feet deep on the first floor and still rising.

He returned to Elinor's bedroom and looked out the window. The water was about eight feet deep in the yard. He could see it spilling over the top of the levee.

He walked over to the bed and took dead Elinor's other hand.

"I don't expect we can get away, Zaddie," he said.

Zaddie shook her head, and said with proud solemnity, "Miss Elinor say to me, long time ago, 'Zaddie, that levee gone hold up till I die, and then that water gone wash this town away.'"

They sat and they waited; gradually the rain tapered off. The effect of so much silence was eerie to Billy and Zaddie, much eerier than the fact that they were sitting and holding the hands of a dead woman, much eerier than the sounds they heard from below of the furniture knocking against the walls and ceiling of the first-floor rooms.

After a time, Zaddie looked down at the floor and lifted her feet experimentally. The carpet was sodden.

"Starting to come through," she remarked.

Billy only nodded; he had already seen that.

Zaddie and Billy waited with infinite patience, not once thinking of rescue, or attempting to get away. Now and then Billy turned to the window and glanced to see if the dawn was near, but the sky remained absolutely black. It was still covered with clouds, but the clouds now merely scudded past, and dropped no more rain.

Both Zaddie and Billy were lost in their own thoughts; Elinor's hands grew cold in theirs. Finally, dawn began slowly to creep in upon them. The water was more than a foot deep in the room, and Zaddie and Billy had pulled up their feet into their chairs. Small objects floated in from the hallway like tiny curious animals and, after abiding awhile, floated back out again. As the dawn became strong, the two weary people were roused by a bumping sound that was louder than the others.

"What was that?" Zaddie said quickly.

Billy shook his head. "Something knocking against the side of the house, that's all. I imagine pretty much everything in this town is floating around. I'm surprised we haven't had any telephone poles poke through the window."

The knock was repeated, twice in rapid succession. It sounded insistent.

Billy slowly let go of Elinor's hand, and placed it on her breast. He went to the window and looked out, blinking against the light.

"What is it?" Zaddie asked.

"A boat," said Billy calmly. "Somebody has tied a boat to this window." He turned back to Zaddie. "Come on, Zaddie. It's time for us to go."

"Cain't leave Miss Elinor," said Zaddie.

"Yes, we can," said Billy. He waded across the room and out through the sitting room into the hallway. "Frances!" he called, not with questioning or timidity, but with complete confidence that she was there. No answer came, but Billy went on, "Frances, Zaddie and I are going on now. You take care of Elinor, will you?"

Without waiting for a reply, he went back into the bedroom. Zaddie was leaning over the bed, pressing her cheek against Elinor's, cold and wasted.

"I'm ready, Mr. Billy," she said.

Billy was at the window. He reached out, pulled the boat nearer, and with some awkwardness, climbed into it. He grasped hold of the sill and tried to hold the boat steady while Zaddie, with much greater awkwardness, somehow got into it.

Immediately, Billy untied the boat and began to row away from the house. Zaddie, seated in the stern, turned to look back, but Billy said, "No. Don't." But his own gaze never moved from the open window through which they had climbed. And what he saw there through that window made him weep as he paddled away.

So through the dawn of that morning that broke on the destruction of Perdido, Billy Bronze and Zaddie Sapp rowed slowly toward high ground.

Here ends the mysterious saga of the Caskey family.

About Michael McDowell

Michael McDowell (1950-1999) was the author of more than thirty novels, including *The Amulet*, *Cold Moon Over Babylon*, *Blackwater*, and *The Elementals*.

He wrote or collaborated on the screenplays for *Beetlejuice*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and *Thinner*, as well as episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Amazing Stories*, *Monsters*, and *Tales from the Darkside*.

McDowell held a master's degree in English from Harvard and a PhD in English and American Literature from Brandeis, but he was happy to carve a place for himself in the world of popular fiction. "I am a commercial writer and I'm proud of that," he said in one interview.

And no less an authority than Stephen King once proclaimed McDowell "the finest writer of paperback originals in America."

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